

THE TAI OF ASSAM  
AND ANCIENT TAI RITUAL

Volume II

Sacrifices and Time-reckoning

by

B. J. TERWIEL

CENTRE FOR SOUTH EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
GAYA - 823 001

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*General Editor*

SACHCHIDANAND SAHAI

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is the second volume of a study regarding the cultural heritage of some ethnic groups in Assam which can all be given the label Tai.<sup>1</sup> In the first volume considerable attention has been given to the vexed problems connected with the origin and the earliest history of the Tai peoples in general as well as to the much less controversial issue of the role of Tai peoples in the history of Assam. In order to make it possible that this book can be used in its own right, without continuous references to Volume I, the main points raised there will be summarily repeated in the first section of this introduction. Those who wish to read more on this subject, or who would like to take note of the many references to the literature on this topic, need perforce consult Volume I or look up an even more detailed account published elsewhere<sup>2</sup>.

These books on the Tai of Assam represent an effort to gain insight into aspects of traditional Tai culture with the aid of a rather strictly applied scientific method, and the shape of the main chapters is determined by this method. It is necessary therefore also to give a short outline of the basic presuppositions, the research aims and techniques. The second section of the introduction is concerned with such matters.

First, however, the word "Tai" must be defined. In a twentieth century context the term poses little problems: the Tai are all peoples speaking Tai languages, such as the Shan, the Khamti, the Lue, the Yuan, the Thai or Siamese, the Lao, the Neua, the Black Tai, the White Tai, the Red Tai and the Chung Chia.<sup>3</sup> However, when dealing with speculations about Tai groups during periods of time when there existed as yet no written records in Tai, the linguistic criterion is inadequate. In these volumes the term Tai is used, not only for all those peoples who are at present speaking Tai languages, but also for those who may be regarded as the ancestors of present-day Tai. It is a matter of judgement how far back in time such a label can be meaningfully applied. Scholars are by no means in agreement as to when Tai culture came into existence. In these volumes it is assumed that the formation of the earliest recognisable Tai culture occurred during the Han period.

SECTION I: THE LIKELY ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF THE  
TAI PEOPLES

There are many hypotheses regarding the whereabouts of what some scholars deem to be Tai peoples or their ancestors during the first and

<sup>1</sup> The term is defined below. In order to diminish the chance of creating a confusion between the words "Tai" and "Thai" the latter term will be accompanied by the words "of Thailand" or the time-honoured substitute "Siamese" will be used.

<sup>2</sup> B. J. Terwiel, "The Origin of the Tai Peoples Reconsidered", *Oriens Extremus*, Volume 25, Part 2, 1978, pp. 239-58.

<sup>3</sup> For present-day Tai subdivisions, see F. M. Lebar (*et al.*), *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, New Haven: HRAF Press, 1964, p. 187 *et seq.*

second millennium B.C. and even further back in time. The most widespread and popular "theory" is one whereby the Tai peoples are believed to have originated somewhere in Mongolia. This has long been taught as part of the school curriculum amongst the Siamese. The idea that the Tai peoples walked down from Mongolia to Southeast Asia probably stems from a misreading of a statement by Terrien de Lacouperie which was printed in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> It is remarkable that the educated Tai of Assam also accept the thought that they are of Mongolian stock, but in Assam this myth is based mainly upon a local classification of facial features. To many Assamese there are in Assam many peoples who do not appear to belong to one of India's races and these can be lumped together as "Mongolians", for they display, apart from a relatively light skin colour, often the "Mongolian" epicanthic fold. All Tai of Assam fall in this category. However, to the observer who is familiar with the communities of Southeast Asia, the facial characteristics of the Assamese Tai do not necessarily indicate a link with peoples from northern Asia. Though there is evidence of a certain degree of mixture between Tai peoples and communities from southern China, most Tai, including those of Assam, are clearly genetically linked with Southeast Asian peoples. This is also borne out by anthropobiological studies.<sup>5</sup>

As yet no convincing evidence has been brought forward upon which a hypothesis of a Mongolian background for the Tai peoples can be built. On the contrary, the rather scanty evidence regarding the early days of Tai culture which has been collected by scholars studying fields such as comparative linguistics in which Tai words probably belonging to an early stage of the development of Tai culture, or economics in which the economic background of traditional Tai polities are examined, points to a genesis of Tai culture far away from Mongolia. For example, most scholars agree that traditional Tai culture is intimately linked with rice-growing in particular types of lowlands. Tai people flourish in upland valleys and the older forms of Tai rice-growing, though in permanent fields and using techniques of irrigation, was not suited to life in the heart of the flood plains. If they were settled in a major plain they most likely chose the relatively safe edges of the lowlands where irrigation was simply a matter of tapping and guiding mountain streams in the direction of small level fields, each surrounded by a small dyke. The typically Tai house is suited to lowland, to marshy conditions and to an occasional flood, for it is always built upon stilts. Hence it is impossible to divorce lowland rice-cultivation from traditional Tai culture. An examination of the distribution of different types of rice in Southeast Asia yields a remarkable coincidence. Everywhere the Tai dominate there is also the cultivation of glutinous rice in a proportion of the available fields. It is indeed hard to find *oriza glutinosa* in areas where no Tai live. Tai peoples appear to have spread this type of rice over mainland Southeast Asia and Assam, and the idea that they might have been the first to develop and cultivate this particular type of rice is worthy of further investigation. A people whose cultural goods are

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

Chapter I, and "The Origin of the Tai

<sup>5</sup> See *The Tai of Assam*, Volume I, Peoples Reconsidered", pp. 245-4.

so intimately linked with rice-growing in permanent fields cannot meaningfully look for its roots in Mongolia, but must trace its genesis in the relatively warm lowlands.

Scholars disagree as to exactly where this Tai culture was formed. Some believe that the peoples who lived millennia ago in northern Thailand and Laos were Tai, others look in the direction of middle and southern China, and yet other researchers consider it likely that the Tai developed their characteristic cultural features in the region now known as Tongkin and coastal Kwangsi. Personally I am inclined to place myself amongst the latter group, but up to the present the study of Tai prehistory remains rather sketchy. Hopefully archaeologists, comparative linguists and geneticists will continue to collect evidence which will throw light upon this matter.

For the purpose of this book, it does not really matter where the peoples giving rise to Tai culture lived during the first, second, or even third millennium B.C. Indeed, in my reading of the evidence it may be assumed that the cultural features which now are recognised as typically Tai did not evolve until around the beginning of our era. It may well be futile to speak about things Tai before that time. This study deals with Tai culture of a much more recent date, namely with a period for which there exists strong evidence in favour of the existence of such a culture.

The first unequivocal mention of Tai people probably goes back to the Han period. It was decided to adopt the term "Proto Tai" for the period beginning around 200 B.C. until 200 A.D. From then until 700 A.D., a period for which there are still relatively few sources on the Tai, the label "Archaic Tai" is applied. Between 700 A.D. and the end of the first millennium falls the "Ancient Tai" time which comes in for a lot of attention in this book. The Ancient Tai period is the time just before the Tai started writing their own history. These labels must not be regarded as generally accepted. They are simply heuristic devices to help evaluate the evidence collected in these volumes. It is quite likely that at some time in the future they will have to be shifted or reformulated as more evidence is accumulated.

One of the aims of this book is to elucidate aspects of Ancient Tai culture, to examine the Tai of the period immediately before their spectacular spreading over most of mainland Southeast Asia. It is assumed here that around the end of the first millennium A.D. the Tai formed a relatively homogeneous group. Although later corroborating evidence was collected from other disciplines this assumption originally rested largely upon evidence brought forward by linguists. All present-day Tai languages have been judged to be quite closely related to each other. Those Tai speakers who have mastered a relatively "pure" form of Tai have little difficulty understanding other traditional Tai languages. For example, a Yuan speaker can communicate with many Tai in southern China and a Shan soon feels at home in Laos. From reading passages in Ahom manuscripts it is quite clear to this researcher that even Ahom, a Tai language which has been extinct for some time, is more closely related to other Tai languages than the present dictionaries and grammatical studies would suggest. The reason why Ahom studies diverge linguistically so much from other Tai



studies lies in the fact that the scholars dealing with Ahom have generally approached that language from an "Indo-germanic framework" and have used a method of transcription based upon the standard transcription of Assamese. There is little doubt that linguists with a thorough training in one or more of the other Tai languages will be able to elucidate Ahom to a greater extent than hitherto has been done.

It is thus assumed that at the end of the first millennium A.D. the Tai-speakers formed a relatively tightly-knit culture with specific Tai characteristics and they are believed to have been living in an area where communication with each other was possible and contacts were maintained. The area in question covered many of the upper valleys of what is now northern Vietnam and large tracts of lowlands in what is now southeastern China, a region where still many millions of Tai can be found. The Tai were a vigorous and martial people who, through natural increase and through conquest had long been moving northwards deeper into areas of China. Already during the period here assigned the label "Archaic Tai" they had experienced some difficulties regarding the expansion to the north. The Chinese assumed overlordship over some of the lands claimed by the Tai and occasionally they had to exert considerable force. There are accounts of Tai uprisings and rebellions and of repeated Chinese military intervention.

The Tai had to come to the conclusion that a northern expansion was no longer feasible and indeed that the Chinese were gaining ground. This circumstance accounts, at least in this researcher's opinion, for the beginning of the Tai expansion over mainland Southeast Asia. Until then the formidable mountain ranges which sweep through Vietnam and Laos towards the foothills of the Himalayas had effectively held the Tai back from expanding in that direction. Some time around the end of the first millennium A.D. groups of Tai began crossing these mountain ranges in search of fertile valleys. The Tai's spreading over mainland Southeast Asia appears to have been fairly rapid. In the eleventh century the Tai first appear in Cham inscriptions and in the records of Pagan, but during the thirteenth century they had already reached all the regions where they can be found today.

It is often thought that the spreading of the Tai was one of "infiltration", a slow process of filling up the region with Tai migrants, rather than by conquest.<sup>6</sup> In these books this "infiltration theory" is not supported. Whilst it is true that no spectacular battles have been recorded and no cities were razed down, the Tai expansion was probably by no means peaceful. The lack of records of warfare is here interpreted as a reflection of the lack of strong polities in the region which was conquered by the Tai. Broman was probably the first to recognise the generally forceful character of the Tai incursions. A Tai ruler, accompanied by a band of warriors and their families, would descend upon a fertile valley and request the local population to recognise him as overlord or else give battle.<sup>7</sup> Whilst there is but

<sup>6</sup> G. Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (edited by W. F. Vella and translated by S. Brown Cowing), Canberra: A.N.U. Press, 1968, p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> B. M. Broman, "Early Political Institutions of the Thai: Synthesis and Symbiosis", University of Washington M.A. Thesis, 1968, pp. 18-21.

scanty evidence for any theory on this matter, the little there is appears to support Broman's point of view. A careful reading of the available Tai historical legends indicates a journey of conquest rather than a peaceful spreading. The exploits of the Black Tai princes apparently fit this pattern,<sup>8</sup> as do those of the first Ahom nobles.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as soon as the Tai appear in a region the old established cultural and literary traditions stop abruptly to make way for a Tai way of life; there is no sign of the compromise and mutual adaptation characteristic of a slowly "infiltrating" people.

Another theme, one which is often stressed in the less scholarly books which mention the Tai expansion over mainland Southeast Asia, is that the sudden spread was the result of the Mongol conquest of China. Reputedly, Kublai Khan's armies, conquering the "Tai kingdom of Nanchao", caused a massive thrust of Tai peoples southwards. Tai chauvenists romantically add the thought that the Tai peoples could not face the burden of Mongol overlordship and preferred to leave their comfortable homes in their ancient kingdom in search for a place where real freedom could still be found. Such a view is based upon untenable presuppositions. The famous kingdom of Nanchao, which flourished from the eighth century until Kublai Khan's incursions during the thirteenth century, has been wrongly assigned the label Tai. Although Nanchao during its greatest days probably counted some Tai groups amongst its varied population, it is generally accepted amongst scholars that the leading sectors of the Nanchao polity were not Tai.<sup>10</sup> When Kublai Khan conquered Nanchao no exodus of Tai peoples took place, and the picture of a wave of Tai peoples fleeing in front of his army is altogether false and misleading. The Tai peoples were already firmly entrenched in what is now called northern Laos, northern Thailand, northern Burma and they had already established a stronghold in the Brahmaputra valley some time before the Mongols took control of Yunnan in 1253.

Naturally, this does not deny the possibility that the later Yuan dynasty's attacks upon Vietnam and Burma must have had a profound effect upon the balance of power in mainland Southeast Asia. The temporary weakening of all major powers in this region gave the Tai peoples a chance to strengthen their hold upon many of the valleys they had taken and venture into new regions. The no-man's land which was created by the temporary weakening of the Burmese and the Khmer was rapidly filled by Tai. Thus, indirectly, the Mongol invasion did propel Tai expansion, but it is incorrect to state that the Tai were pushed out of China into the region they inhabit at present by the actions of Kublai Khan.

From the thirteenth century onward the history of the Tai peoples is one of efforts to consolidate their hold over the many valley regions they had acquired. The Tai had spread over a vast region which contained immense stretches of countryside which was too mountainous to be of any use to them and their wet-rice oriented economy. The particular topography of the region occupied by the Tai in mainland Southeast Asia is not

<sup>8</sup> H. Roux, "Quelques minorités ethniques du Nord-Indochine", *France-Asie*, January-February 1954, pp. 378-80.

*Ahom Buranjī*, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1930, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> "The Origin of the Tai Peoples Reconsidered", p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> G. C. Barua (translator and editor),

conducive to forming an all-Tai polity. Most Tai nobles found themselves ruling quite independently part of a larger valley or even a whole one. In many regions where contact between groups of ruling families was possible, regular exchange of marriage partners became the norm and closely related to this was the formation of a series of pacts between Tai rulers for mutual aid and defense. In general, however, the Tai had spread so widely over a mountainous region that eastern groups lost contact with those in the west and northern groups with those in the south. The present-day range of Tai languages and separate dialects testifies to the fact that since their spreading over mainland Southeast Asia there was no longer communication and homogeneity in the Tai culture.

During the thirteenth century the Tai had not only conquered a multitude of small and large valleys, but also they had reached two lowlands which were immense compared to the average valley in the northern part of mainland Southeast Asia. These were the valley now known as the Chao Phraya Valley, the main lowlands of Thailand, and the Brahmaputra Valley, the bulk of which now forms the Indian state of Assam. In both these lowlands the Tai were not constricted by mountains and there they interacted with long-established civilizations to a much larger extent than other Tai in Southeast Asia. In the Chao Phraya Valley the Tai built up the state known as Siam, and in doing so they transformed much of their original tradition under influence of that of the Khmer and, to a lesser degree, of that of the Burmese. In the Brahmaputra lowlands the Tai slowly built up another major kingdom, which eventually came to comprise the whole of what is now called Assam, and in the process they developed a culture with distinctive Assamese traits.

It is not here the place to recount in detail either Siamese or Ahom history, but since these books are partly based upon evidence collected from the Tai of Assam, a few paragraphs on Ahom history and on the intrusion of other Tai peoples into the Brahmaputra valley seem appropriate.

In 1215 A.D., in what may be recognised as a typically Tai fashion, a group of Ahom warriors under the leadership of Sue Ka Phaa (Sukapha)<sup>11</sup> set out from their valley in what is now upper Burma to search for a valley of their own. They moved through Naga territory over the Patkai hills and reached the vast fertile Brahmaputra Valley. Sue Ka Phaa fought and subdued a local group of people and thus forged a bridgehead for the Tai. Slowly but steadily the Tai-ruled territory was consolidated and expanded. For four generations Sue Ka Phaa's line of rulers continued. In Volume I it has been argued that the fifth Ahom ruler in Assam, Tow Kham Ti (Taokhamti) probably was not a descendant of Sue Ka Phaa. Various other families rose to lead the Ahom. Until the beginning of the sixteenth century the Ahom kingdom remained relatively obscure in the general Assamese history. The Ahom then occupied the region south of the Brahmaputra and east of the Dikho river and the greatest Assamese powers lived further westwards. It is only during the long reign of Sue Hung Mueng (Suhungmung; 1497-1539) that the Ahom realm was greatly expanded. The Ahom fought then for the first time with success the Chutiyas

<sup>11</sup> For details of the romanisation of *literation* at the end of this introductory Ahom words, see the *Note on trans-* chapter.

and the Kacharis and rapidly doubled their territory. It is during this period that the Ahom adopted the use of gun-powder and fire-arms. The period of Ahom expansion coincides with a growing influence of Brahmanism and Vaisnavism in Ahom society. During the sixteenth century the Ahom had reached such power that they began competing for power with the Koch and throughout the century there were many armed clashes. At first the Koch were successful, then the Ahom. Later the Koch returned in force and even managed to take the Tai capital in 1563. Temporarily the Koch were the acknowledged supreme rulers, but the Tai asserted independence at the first opportunity, seven years after the fall of their capital. The seventeenth century must be regarded as the most dramatic of all Ahom history. In this period the Ahom realm expanded drastically to encompass most of what is now called Assam. The state developed an efficient system of bureaucracy and consolidated its power by the organisation of a large standing army. In the second half of the seventeenth century the Ahom rulers boldly encroached upon territory which had been traditionally under Muslim control, and as a result the redoubtable Mir Jumla marched his army deep into the Ahom country. Mir Jum'a took the nation's capital and a tremendous amount of valuables was taken. For a while the Ahom agreed to send tribute but soon they reneged and thereby invited a second invasion. This time, however, the conflict ended in an Ahom victory. By the end of the century the Manas river had become the accepted border between the Muslim empire and the Ahom sphere of influence and effectively the Tai had thus managed to bring a halt to the Muslim expansion to the east.

The beginning of the eighteenth century marks a period during which the Bengali culture became the model for the intellectual elite and large sections of the populace forewent their Tai religious practices in favour of Hinduism. The growth of British interests in the region coincided with a period of internal dissent and factionalism in Ahom society. By this time the Ahom had adopted a way of life which made it often difficult to distinguish them from other Assamese Hindus. However, many Ahom families maintained the custom of only marrying other Ahom. At present there are in the Assamese population still several hundred thousand people who identify themselves as Ahom, even though they have long lost the skill of speaking Tai and only a few amongst them can decipher the old books and chronicles pertaining to their own history.

For the ethnohistorian it is of great interest to note that amongst the more traditional Ahom, especially amongst those who live in relatively isolated villages, there still survive old customs which undoubtedly represent aspects of Tai culture. A description of some of these traditions forms part of the foundation upon which these volumes are constructed.

Although the Ahom are by far the most numerous group of people who can trace Tai descent, they are by no means the only Tai of Assam. There are a few thousand Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti peoples and also there are reputedly small pockets of Tai under labels such as Nora, Aiton and Turung. Each of these groups has its own history of migration to the Brahmaputra Valley, which took place during the last two-and-a-half centuries. Each of these groups speaks Tai in a distinctive manner. The three most important groups are the Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti. From

the ethnographic data published in Volume I it has become clear that these three groups represent separate Tai traditions. Representatives of all three groups have been interviewed extensively on particular aspects of their traditional culture and this material forms three further basic sets of data which guided the comparative study of Tai customs.

Although Ahom, Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti have in common that they can all claim Tai descent, the latter three have been treated quite separately from the Ahom. The Ahom became isolated from the mainstream of Tai culture almost eight centuries ago, the other groups arrived relatively recently and they were able, especially during the time that the British Indian empire comprised both India and Burma, to keep some contact with relatives over the Patkai mountains. Whilst the Ahom were deeply influenced by the general Assamese culture and most of them became Hindus, the other three groups are staunch adherents of the Buddhist religion. Whilst present-day Ahom know only through old manuscripts that once they must have used Tai, there are, especially amongst the Phakey and Khamti many individuals who speak Tai at home. The Ahom demonstrate their Tai decent in a few areas of their culture, but the recent Tai immigrants can recollect a wealth of typically Tai customs.

Altogether the whole range of Tai peoples in Assam provide a good basis for the beginning of a comparative cultural study for they represent an interesting case where descendants of Tai who were separated from other Tai peoples live side by side with three groups of Tai who kept their culture alive.

## SECTION 2: RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS

From the previous section it has become clear that the Tai peoples are extremely widespread — they live in the plains of southern China, in the valleys of northern Vietnam, they are the dominating peoples of Laos and Thailand, they inhabit most of the low-lying areas of northern Burma and several Tai groups are also represented in Assam. Through geographical factors and also because of political circumstances the various Tai groups have effectively lost contact with each other. A Tai in southern Thailand has little or no chance of obtaining knowledge about Tai peoples in China; a Shan from Burma can hardly be aware of the fact that great numbers of Tai speakers live in Vietnam. This effective isolation is one of the considerations upon which the scholarly exercise in these volumes is built. Another important aspect is the thought that this scattering of the Tai over many valleys separated by international borders and mountain ranges has taken place quite abruptly from about the beginning of the second millennium A.D. until the thirteenth century, when the Tai had reached all the regions where they can be found today. It has also been argued that before their spreading over mainland Southeast Asia took place the Tai culture appears to have been much more homogeneous than is the case at present.

This particular situation whereby people of one culture have become split up into many sub-groups at a particular period of time and whereby each of the sub-groups has developed in its own specific setting makes for



a "laboratory" situation which is suited for the study of the culture of that people. If a clear picture could be obtained of the common heritage of that people, its culture at the time just before separation and dispersion, it would constitute an almost ideal starting point for the study of cultural change. In this case, basing oneself upon the Ancient Tai culture of the end of the first millennium A.D., it would for example be possible to assess the impact of Buddhism in a Laotian, a Siamese, a Burmese and an Assamese setting. However, such studies of cultural change cannot be attempted with much chance of success until a reasonably clear picture has been obtained of what the Tai culture entailed before it spread so widely. It is the latter aim which has given rise to these volumes.

There are two basic assumptions upon which this whole exercise rests. One is that there is such a thing as a relatively homogeneous Tai culture at the end of the first millennium A.D. The other is that there are a sufficient number of traditional aspects in various Tai cultures which have changed so little during the last nine centuries as to make comparison and reconstruction of an Ancient Tai prototype possible.

The first assumption rests largely upon statements made by linguists and upon a piecing together of the early history of the Tai peoples. The second assumption rests largely upon personal observation and experience. From 1967 onwards I collected a large body of information on customs and rituals of traditional Siamese farmers. At that time it lay not in my attention to pursue comparative studies — the evidence brought together was analysed in isolation. The main purpose at that time was to understand the principles underlying the whole system of ritual action of Siamese farmers. The fact that this ritual was itself the final product of a long and intricate series of developments, and that some of these could possibly belong to the culture of the Ancient Tai was taken for granted. The ordering of the material collected in central Thailand so as to obtain a reasonably satisfactory set of principles took several years, and it was not until 1977, ten years after the original research had begun, that the literature on rituals amongst other Tai groups began to attract my attention. At the end of 1978 and during the beginning of 1979 I had the great fortune of being able to conduct some fieldwork in Assam and visit villages of Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti-speakers, taking note of the traditions alive amongst these peoples. That was the time when the second assumption, namely that traditional aspects of a common Ancient Tai culture are still recognisable, was forcefully brought home. There was no reason whatsoever to suspect direct or indirect contact between farmers in central Thailand and farmers in Assam. Yet they shared certain cultural goods, sometimes identical to the smallest detail. This strongly suggested that it was possible to reconstruct aspects of a common heritage. It was then that the decision was made to conduct a series of fieldworks and make a search through the literature with the aim of reconstructing, as far as possible, aspects of that shared tradition.

This is not the first time that the cultural similarities amongst Tai peoples have been recognised, nor is it a novel idea to look for common traits. However, probably this is the first attempt to do so in a systematic, encompassing and thorough manner, developing techniques and fieldwork

methods adapted to the aims of the research and the problems inherent in the situation. It was decided to tackle at first only specific aspects of Tai culture and to assess all the evidence that could be assembled on those aspects only.

The approach to the research can be divided into several methodological stages and they are here summarily arranged. First the researcher selects a particular custom, a ritual or an aspect of traditional Tai society. This selection is guided to a large extent by knowledge gained during previous periods of fieldwork and by scanning through the ethnographic literature on Tai peoples. Thus, life-cycle ceremonies were selected as a promising field of enquiry for the first volume in this series and sacrifices and systems of time-reckoning have been chosen as the basis for the second book.

The second stage consists of familiarising oneself with the topic through reading widely on the chosen field. In this reading the researcher is guided by a search through the most trustworthy accounts which reveal traditional aspects. Both contemporary and historical sources are used. The collecting of relevant material from Ahom, Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti peoples in Assam may be fitted in this stage of research. It is important not to choose a "correct" piece of information simply because it would correspond with the researcher's view of what is traditional Tai culture. Insight derives from a wide and large collection of variants in the greatest possible detail.<sup>12</sup>

The third stage consists of sifting through the large amounts of collected material and recognising the apparent "recent" innovations. In the following study of time-reckoning, for example, the fact that the Siamese use a seven-day week of which the days are given names apparently derived from Sanskrit is regarded as a "recent" innovation, that is, the seven-day week most probably does not belong to the system of time-reckoning of the Tai at the end of the first millennium A.D. These innovations are often so obvious that the reader is not bothered with a full discussion of the process of recognising and omitting them. However, the deliberate stripping of many interesting and valuable aspects of culture may leave the reader with a somewhat false impression of present-day Tai cultures. A study of Ancient Tai sacrifices especially should not be taken as a guide to understand the Assamese Tai who, by and large, count themselves as belonging to the Hindu tradition if they are of Ahom descent, and to the Buddhist faith when they are Khamyang, Phakey or Khamti individuals.

The fourth stage of the exercise consists of setting out, in geographical order, the typically traditional aspects of the chosen topic, beginning with the Tai of Assam and ending with those who live in southern China. This is called the inventory stage, in which as many details pertinent to the ancient tradition as can be obtained, are presented. This researcher relies upon first-hand observation only with regard to some of the Ahom, Khamyang, Phakey, Khamti and Siamese data. For all the other Tai groups, unfortunately, other people's observations have to be used. During this

<sup>12</sup> This has also been noted by R. Gombrich, "The Buddha's Eye, the Evil Eye, and Dr. Ruelius", *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries* (edited by H. Bechert), Göttingen: Van den Hoeck & Ruprecht, 1978, p. 335.

inventory stage it becomes quite obvious that the more details an ethnographic account presents, the more valuable it becomes for this exercise. The apparently trivial matters, such as whether a right hand or a left hand is tied, whether one or two incense sticks are burnt, or the exact pronunciation of a god's name, become the strongest building blocks for the later reconstruction of Ancient Tai aspects of culture.

The fifth stage consists of an assessment of which (if any) of the collected data may be assumed to belong to the presupposed Ancient Tai culture. The main criterium for deciding whether or not to include a particular aspect in the Ancient Tai tradition is the geographical spread of that aspect. If, for example, a certain distinctive trait is only encountered amongst Tai peoples who live in Vietnam, or only amongst the Tai of Assam and the neighbouring Shan, it may not be included amongst the items which belong to the Ancient Tai heritage. In such cases it is quite possible that the trait has been developed locally after the spread and isolation of groups of Tai peoples took place, or that it has been borrowed from a neighbouring non-Tai group. However, if a relevant aspect of a custom can be found amongst Tai groups which may safely be supposed not to have been in contact with each other since the spreading over mainland Southeast Asia took place, such as the Tai of Vietnam and those living in Assam, then a common origin appears likely. This does not necessarily exclude borrowing from other cultures, but if the data suggest such contacts with other cultures, these are likely to have taken place during the Ancient Tai period or before.

The sixth stage consists of a scanning of the available literature in order to assess to what extent the Tai tradition is shared amongst other peoples. In this search no effort is made to do full justice to all the rich cultural traditions of the scores of peoples who live around the Tai. This search is determined only by the findings on the Tai, and it is directed only to establish cases of shared tradition. If possible, an assessment is also made as to whether the Tai were recipients or donors, or whether it is more likely that the shared trait must be regarded as a common shared good amongst a larger group of peoples.

In this second volume two aspects of Tai culture are explored and subjected to the full treatment described above. The first of these topics arises from two interviews held at the beginning of 1979 amongst groups of elderly Tai Khamyang in Sibsagar District, Assam. In the course of the first of these interviews it was revealed that these men had been present at animal sacrifices and that such rituals once formed part of the regular communal village ceremonies. The second interview provided corroboration of this information. The subject came very much as a surprise to me, because I had been able to notice the prominence of Buddhism in the lives of the Khamyang, and Buddhism is in principle strongly opposed to blood sacrifices. During the ten months available between returning from the first period of fieldwork in Assam and setting out for a second spell a large amount of ethnographic literature regarding Tai peoples was consulted in order to assess whether communal sacrifices such as those described by the Khamyang also have been recorded for other Tai groups. This search proved fairly encouraging in that especially for the non-Buddhist Tai a sacrificial tradition was found to be still alive and that some vestiges of



sacrifices could also be found amongst some of the Buddhist groups. It was therefore decided to try and obtain a more detailed picture of blood sacrifices amongst the Assamese Tai during the three months available for the second period of fieldwork. The results of these enquiries, which are reported in the second and third chapter of this book, were sufficiently encouraging to warrant a full treatment and assessment for elements which may be traced to the Ancient Tai tradition.

The choice of the second topic in this volume was made only after returning from the second period of fieldwork, when it became clear that the sacrificial traditions could be described fairly concisely and that it was possible to add a second topic. I have long been looking for an opportunity to write out the most traditional system of Tai computation of time. My file on this topic was opened more than ten years ago when I studied the introduction of the seven-day week in Siam and ever since that beginning masses of information, ranging from various eras to samples of calendars found their way into that file. Systems of time-reckoning, which are discussed in chapters six and seven, form a refreshingly different topic; their very character makes for a concise, accurate and relatively simple study. Apparently a comprehensive study of the archaic aspects of Tai computation of time has never before been attempted. It proved a very rewarding exercise which leads to insight into the early Tai history from a rather novel angle.

As part of this section on research aims and methods it is appropriate to mention some of the conditions under which research took place. The research upon which the bulk of this book is based was greatly facilitated by the fact that it was not the first visit to the region. Only a year earlier I had been able to make a tour of certain Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti communities in Sibsagar and Dibrugarh District, the details of which have been reported in Volume I. On this occasion three months had been reserved for collecting data. Since such a period allows for more than a tour of villages it was decided to try and find a relatively central base from where repeated excursions to Tai communities could be made. Such a base was found in Dibrugarh University, the only university in upper Assam and one which fortunately boasts an Anthropology Department. After contact was made I was offered an honorary teaching post for the duration of the visit, as well as assistance regarding the housing of my family. Therefore, the campus of Dibrugarh University became the centre from where various research trips were planned, where some informants came to stay and where much of the translation of interviews took place.

Whilst apparently all conditions for fruitful research were thus available, circumstances beyond my control threatened to thwart all attempts to travel outside Dibrugarh town itself. This unforeseen factor was the political situation in Assam, which has during the second half of 1979 developed into a confrontation between representatives of India's central government and certain dissenting sections of the population. Here is not the place to describe the background of this confrontation or the history of some of the grievances which were vented in the protests; many reports have already appeared in the local and international press. It suffices to mention briefly that in January 1980, just when the fieldwork was planned to begin, an ugly

situation had developed. Institutes of learning, such as Dibrugarh University had long been unable to operate and classes had been cancelled indefinitely. The disputes and their ramifications effectively paralyzed many aspects of economic life. There had developed a serious shortage of petroleum products, such as diesel oil and kerosene. On some days all traffic stopped, and throughout the period of fieldwork very few buses plied their customary routes. The occasional bus carried so many people that an anthropologist, his assistant and research equipment could not be added without great discomfort to all parties concerned.

The main effect of this situation upon the research was that it complicated matters somewhat. Thus it was difficult to gain access to the local authorities who were plagued with a multitude of matters more pressing than foreigners wishing to roam about in a region where unfortunately some violent scenes could be expected. Without the unstinted help of some enthusiastic Assamese Tai who were able to ensure the acquisition of travel permits and who guarded my safety it would have been necessary to postpone the whole fieldwork to some other time. With their aid, however, I was able to re-visit and interview many Tai acquaintances in Naharkutia, in Namphakey, in Powai Mukh, in Disangpani and in Chalapathar. In addition it was possible to spend some time in Tai communities which had not been included in the 1978/79 tour, such as Rohon, a Khamyang village in Sibsagar District, Tipam, a Phakey community in Dibrugarh district and Borkhamti Gaon, a Khamti village in North Lakhimpur District. In addition, I had the great fortune of being allowed to pursue my enquiries in some traditional Ahom communities in the three districts mentioned above. On some of these travels I was able to witness traditional Ahom ceremonies, including one during which animal sacrifices took place. Altogether it proved possible to organise a dozen research excursions, ranging from trips which could be concluded within one day to travels lasting up to four days. The intervals between travels were used to work out fieldwork notes, to prepare for new interviews and to read in the library of Dibrugarh University.

Although it had been possible to become acquainted with the Assamese script and to learn a certain number of Assamese words, I was not able to conduct interviews in this medium and again I was forced to rely upon interpreters. This time, however, I was better able to control the situation through the command of some Assamese. In order to cope with the rather sensitive subject of sacrifices in Buddhist villages where such practices had long been sworn off, hampered by insufficient knowledge of the local *lingua franca*, a special interviewing technique was developed, which consists of a preparatory stage, the actual interview, translation, analysis and evaluation and follow-up. Relevant details of this technique can be found at the beginning of the following chapter.

### A note of transliteration

Unfortunately there is no universally accepted method of transcribing Tai words. Thus, the principles underlying the transliteration of Ahom are quite different from those with which Shan words are written, there are

many ways of transcribing Siamese and many Tai words from languages spoken in Laos and northern Vietnam are transcribed with a French system of pronunciation in mind. In Volume I the problem became apparent when dealing with the concept of "element of life-force", which was found in the literature transliterated as *khon*, *khvan*, *khwan*, *khhoan*, *xwan*, *khoan*, *quan* and various other spellings were encountered. Some of the variations in spelling probably reflect the fact that in different Tai languages a different pronunciation is used, but other differences seem simply the result of using different systems of transliteration.

At that time, for simplicity's sake, the version *khwan* was chosen to stand for the concept in general, though in reporting ethnographic data, variant pronunciations were not suppressed. A similar case occurs with the Tai concept for "town and its dependent surrounding countryside", "city-state", or "country". This important term is found as *muong*, *mueong*, *muang*, *mu.ng* and the like. When there is reason to suspect that a spelling reflects a variant pronunciation, the local transliteration is retained, but it has been decided to choose the form *mueang* to stand for the concept in general. Another word, one which features large in Volume II, is the one for a "plaited bamboo star meaning a sign of interdiction". Here the transcription *talaeo* has been chosen as a representation for the concept in general.

The principle adopted is thus that it is attempted to reveal the different Tai forms of pronunciation, but all differences in spelling which arise from the use of various systems of transliteration have been obliterated in cases where this was apparent. Since these books are written in English, the system chosen here has an English bias. The most dramatic changes which have been introduced in this volume are in the presentation of Ahom words and in the presentation of data from French sources.

Regarding the Ahom language, the transcription hitherto chosen by Assamese scholars is derived from the system of transcribing Assamese in the Roman alphabet, and only those familiar with the Assamese language can guess how Ahom words in this orthography ought to be pronounced. The standard rendering of Ahom words often make it very difficult to compare them with words in other Tai languages. Our orthography for Ahom is primarily based upon the manner these words are written in the Ahom language, and using the quasi-phonetic rendering of them in an appendix in one of the standard works on Ahom.<sup>12</sup> This system was somewhat adapted and changed after comparing these symbols with the sound of Ahom priests reading their own language. Moreover, the system has been further adapted to make a difference between long and short vowels and to make it possible for it to be typed on an ordinary standard typewriter. Thus long vowels are shown by duplicating a short one, an umlaut is shown through adding "e" to a vowel and comma is placed under the letter "o" in order to indicate an "open o". To give an example of the advantage of the proposed orthography the Ahom word for "chisel" can be taken. In the accepted Assamese transcription this word reads *chew*. Using our system it becomes *shw*. Tai linguists will readily recognise the latter version

<sup>12</sup> B. Barua and N. N. Deodhai Phukan (editors), *Ahom Lexicons*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1964, pp. 198-9.

as a word related to, for example, the Siamese word for the same tool. This apparent connection between these two languages could hardly have been guessed from looking at the word in Assamese transcription. When dealing with Ahom names which are often mentioned in the literature, the hitherto accepted transliteration is often appended in brackets, so as to leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to whom is referred.

The problems with French sources were solved in a similar fashion. Whenever it was felt that a Tai word in a French source could only be pronounced by using a typically French system of pronouncing international symbols of writing, the spelling was altered in favour of the more "English" system used in the transliteration of other Tai sources. Therefore, the symbol "gn" was usually changed into "ny", the sound "y" became "i", whilst "u" changed into "ue" and "j" into "ch" in all cases where there could be no doubt as to the pronunciation of the word. In cases of doubt the variant spellings were retained.

Unfortunately, many ethnographers do not indicate a difference between long and short vowels. Yet, even in cases where I strongly suspect that a vowel needs to be lengthened, I have refrained from doing so and changing it because I have not been able to check the pronunciation with informants speaking that particular form of Tai. This must have resulted in a general bias in favour of short vowels which may not reflect the reality.

Ideally, all Tai words ought to be presented with a symbol indicating what tone is used. However, in some cases, such as that of Ahom, nobody knows which tones were used. In many other cases they have been left out of the ethnographic accounts and even if they are mentioned it is sometimes not clear which criteria were used to determine the tones. In this study it was decided to leave out all reference to tones. In general the transliteration of Tai words in this book is not intended as a model for future studies. Just like the general classification of various Tai groups, it must be regarded as a system which serves the purpose of the exercise.

## BLOOD SACRIFICES AMONGST THE ASSAMESE TAI

**Methodology**

In the search for information regarding traditional customs amongst the Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti, the gathering of notes on animal sacrifices occupies a special place. Whilst it is relatively easy to find a knowledgeable person with whom to discuss information such as old birth customs or the manner in which people used to be tattooed, it is quite a different matter to elicit meaningful remarks on animal offerings.

In the first place such sacrifices have not taken place for a considerable time. In several of the Tai villages selected for interviews there were only a few people alive who have witnessed such rituals, which they may recall seeing in their childhood. The knowledge about these customs is therefore often latent and informants may be unsure regarding the type of details which are of the greatest interest for this research. Secondly, these sacrifices form a subject which is never discussed openly. Sometimes people are even hesitant to admit that communal rituals during which animals were killed and whereby rice-wine was drunk actually took place. The reason for this reluctance lies in the fact that the Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti villagers are staunch Buddhists and they are proud of the fact that they have been Buddhists since times immemorial. They brought their Buddhist religion along when they came from Burma up to 250 years ago. Recalling the fact that some fifty or sixty years ago there were village rituals during which animals were sacrificed and rice-wine was offered amounts, in the eyes of many Assamese Tai, to admitting that once they were not very good Buddhists, to say the least. The Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist precepts teach unequivocally that killing as well as the consumption of alcoholic beverages are actions which lead to bad results and which ought to be abandoned. Especially the subject of animal slaughter is strongly discouraged in sermons and Buddhist folk tales.<sup>1</sup>

In general the Assamese Buddhists are quite sensitive regarding a subject which might be construed to mean that their Buddhism once was not strong enough to prevent ritual slaughter. This defensive feeling is partly the result of their being surrounded by a culture which is dominated by Hinduism. Amongst millions of Hindus they feel themselves to be the staunch upholders of a completely different faith. They demonstrate this by maintaining Buddhist monasteries and shrines and by regularly donating to their own monks. Some of the farmers of Tai descent, especially those Khamyang who have forgotten their Tai language and the Tai style of house building, feel that the fact that they are Buddhists is a strong aid in their

<sup>1</sup> B. J. Terwiel, "The Five Precepts and Siam Society, Volume 60, 1972, pp. 333-343.  
Ritual in Rural Thailand", *Journal of the*



identification as a people with a history different from most Assamese. Being Buddhists links them with some of the great and proud cultures of Southeast Asia.

Although the fact that they are Buddhists may set them apart from the other Assamese, at the same time it provides a series of contacts with the wider world which are highly valued. A prosperous farmer may travel to the famous Buddhist shrines of India and mix with pilgrims from all over the world. A bright young Assamese Tai boy may decide to join the Sangha and thus qualify for scholarships which are not available to other Assamese. Enthusiastic lay Buddhists may join the All-Assam Buddhist Association and open communication with people from other parts of the world. Occasionally the Association may gather sufficient funds to send delegates to an international Buddhist conference and thus provide a few Assamese Buddhists with unique opportunities to travel far and wide.

The wish to delve into the subject of communal animal sacrifices was therefore looked upon by some of the Tai with feelings ranging from disquiet to anxiety. Some thought the topic distinctly of bad taste and wondered what good it would do to rake up events which were better forgotten. Occasionally the worry was voiced that the younger generation might learn shameful aspects of the past. In order to obtain reliable information on this subject which was hidden and considered taboo to many informants special attention had to be given to fieldwork techniques. In a short account the methods used to obtain the information contained in this chapter are set out. They might be of practical use for future ethnographers setting out to obtain relatively secret information.

The first introduction of the researcher to his informants is always a moment of importance. The villagers are told what led this particular researcher to the community; how he has developed an interest in traditional Tai customs and how he wishes to record them for future comparison and analysis. During the interviews on sacrifices extra care was taken to ensure that a stimulating introductory set of ideas was presented. The facts that knowledge of some village traditions was rapidly dying out and that somewhere there ought to be a depository of the beliefs and customs of long ago were stressed. The researcher's introduction of "sacrifice-interviews" improved over time. Experience taught, for example, that it was better not to mention the younger generation's lack of knowledge of the past. After all, there may be people wanting to keep especially knowledge on sacrifices hidden from the young. In general the introduction met with a positive response. The need for a reliable record was readily seen and people with traditional knowledge promised to do what they could to ensure its establishment.

The topic of blood sacrifices was not introduced forthwith; usually a fairly innocuous item of interest began the interview. Subjects suited for this purpose were aspects of traditional house building, questions regarding traditional rain-making rituals or the date of the village's foundation. Some of these topics proved so interesting that they will have to be discussed in detail in some other publication. The second topic broached communal village sacrifices. First it was asked whether informants had ever heard of such a ritual and when the answer was affirmative, further details were

requested, covering the time of the year such a ritual took place, who attended it, where it took place, what was sacrificed, how the sacrifice was performed, what altar was used, to whom the offerings were presented and information on any other detail that could be remembered.

Only on two occasions the interview proceeded smoothly throughout, most probably because the researcher, his assistant and the informant found themselves in an isolated place with no audience. In most cases, however, the arrival of a foreign researcher aroused avid interest and the interview had to be conducted whilst a crowd of people watched the proceedings and commented amongst each other. Quite understandably, under these circumstances the informants would not readily reveal their knowledge on sacrifices. The list of questions would not have been dealt with fully before they would halt and proclaim that they would prefer to speak about another topic; some would use euphemistic words in order to avoid talking about killing altogether; others would suddenly come to the conclusion that they could not possibly recollect any further details.

If this occurred an effort was made to overcome the informant's reluctance by pointing out that it was quite understandable that he did not wish to talk about such matters, but that it was a fact that long ago the customs existed and sacrifices once took place. With the aid of the interpreter it was pointed out that animal sacrifices had already been reported for many other countries, including some Buddhist ones in South-east Asia where Tai people lived. In other words, the details of Assamese Tai sacrifices would be of interest in order to find out more about pre-Buddhist religion. A second point which was raised was that informants need not fear revealing hitherto hidden knowledge, since the basic outline of the rituals had already been explained by previous informants in other Tai villages. The present interview would mainly take the form of confirmation of some of the facts. Then the interview would be resumed with a question such as: "Exactly at what time of the year did the sacrifice take place when you were a small boy?" It was found that once the shock of talking openly about such things in public had worn off, one of the older men would proceed to give some details.

In order to facilitate the flow of information the researcher would endeavour to include other knowledgeable persons in the discussion. If any elderly person indicated a willingness to add something, such a person would be encouraged. In this manner the revelations ceased being the burden of a single spokesman; they became shared by several members of the community. Occasionally a group of elderly people would stimulate each other to tell the story of a humorous or memorable related event. In the hope that the conversation would become animated and that the chances of a revelation of a hitherto unsuspected detail would increase, several precautions were taken.

In the first place the interpreter was instructed to allow people to talk even if the topic apparently had only indirect bearing on the main topic of research. He should refrain from interruptions and posing leading questions as soon as the ice was broken. Secondly, the religious outlook of the interpreter had to be considered. It may be recollected how the first period of research was made possible by the unstinted help of a Buddhist

monk. During this second period of fieldwork this Buddhist monk and his friends and relatives were again extremely helpful. From the outset it was clear, however, that the very presence of a Buddhist monk at the interviews of the second fieldwork would have been a hindrance. Faced with a representative of the Sangha informants would have felt inhibited to speak about customs involving drinking rice-wine and offering sacrifices. Fortunately the opportunity arose to instruct and guide an intelligent Ahom in conducting the interviews. His own religious tradition had brought him in contact with many animal sacrifices and he had no personal antipathy against such practices. In the course of time he developed a lively interest in the topic of research, sometimes suggesting new lines of enquiry and further questions to be explored.

The interpreter's instructions and his training are of great importance in fieldwork situations where the researcher does not master the vernacular. In the case of interviews on subjects which are taboo, the interpreter's training requires extra attention. This involves discussing the fieldwork situation, creating a constant awareness of the research aims, and familiarising the assistant with the list of questions to be put. It also involves a "post-mortem" procedure. After an interview, as soon as the researcher could find a moment apart with the interpreter, its good and its bad points would be discussed and, if mistakes were encountered, ways to avoid them in the future would be developed. In addition, considerable time was devoted to listening to the interview tapes, not only to establish a faithful translation, but also to listen to the background talk and to notice which things were left unsaid.

The tape recorder used, a small-size machine which could be placed on the table and record without attracting too much attention, became an absolutely indispensable instrument. Whilst during the first period of fieldwork the tape recorder was mainly used to record parts which could not be written down, during the second period the interviews were recorded from beginning to end. The practice of continuous taping proved beneficial in several respects. Thus it became no longer necessary to touch the instrument at short intervals, a circumstance which helped informants ignore it. Also it became less important to obtain a written record immediately. Notebooks were still used, but mainly to keep a record of the questions posed and to note relevant gestures and situational aspects which later would help understand the tape. This freed the researcher more to think about the direction of the interview itself. As the researcher became more familiar with Assamese and learned many of the key technical words there was also less and less need to interrupt the interview for a translation. If a translation was requested, the interpreter was instructed to supply only the gist of what had been said and then rapidly to resume the conversation. The tapes became indispensable during the later stages of interviewing: they lent themselves to a word-by-word translation of important passages, they were repeatedly consulted during the practical sessions of interview analysis with the field assistant and finally they were used to compare other interview results.

It must be understood that at first my knowledge of Assamese Tai sacrifices was virtually nil. The technique of letting informants talk freely



and stimulating them to give details was prompted by ignorance and the knowledge obtained was cumulative. For example, whilst there was no doubt in my mind that the Khamyang used to conduct communal sacrifices outside the village, I had not considered the actual shape of the altar until this was casually mentioned. Or, the link between a certain folk hero and the communal sacrifice became apparent only through the volunteered information of a garrulous man. Slowly, item by item, a picture developed with regard to the most prominent aspects of these rituals which could still be recalled.

The technique of encouraging people to speak freely about an aspect of the past which they would rather keep hidden failed only in one instance. In order to prevent personal embarrassment I will not divulge the identity of the community, members of which unitedly attempted to maintain the position that their ancestors did never imbibe rice-wine and that animal sacrifice had not been conducted within living memory. Quite early in the research period a large group of villagers of this community was questioned. The interview went reasonably well regarding various "introductory" traditional customs, but when, boldly, they were asked to discuss a particular type of animal sacrifice there was a stunned silence which was broken by one of the older men firmly declaring that such a thing may have occurred elsewhere but not in this particular village. The others loyally followed suit and a complete blank was drawn regarding related topics. Later during the fieldwork period, after having visited many other Tai villages and after having discovered that sacrifices had been ubiquitous in all these places, the total lack of information from this one Tai community became an interesting anomaly. Careful listening to the tape of the relevant interview revealed a tell-tale change in the tone of the interview from the moment the topic of sacrifices had been introduced. From the original friendly and helpful atmosphere, the attitude suddenly had changed to one of caution whereby no more information had been volunteered. It appeared that the ritual leaders had impulsively taken this stance and had felt honour-bound to maintain it. Counting on my increased knowledge of the ritual details as they were likely to have had occurred, aided by a field-assistant who was well-trained and eager to break the deadlock, it was decided to proceed again to this community, taking care to bring some presents which would be appreciated. We were received as honoured guests. Our statement regarding the progress of the research and how interesting and rewarding the study of traditional sacrificial customs had proven to be, and how these rituals had probably been widespread amongst Tai peoples in general, was listened to with great interest and decorum. The community leaders thought for a while and finally the spokesman said that it was very sad that they could not help us any further, but there was nothing they could remember from the days of their grandfathers or great-grandfathers which could be connected with animal killing or the consumption of rice-wine. This group of elders had the habit of murmuring to each other in their own Tai speech and since these interviews had been conducted in Assamese they had not had the opportunity to assess to what extent my knowledge of Siamese would help me understand their conversations. As a matter of fact I could understand sufficiently to understand that the villagers were

helping each other in keeping up an "ignorant" position and warning each other to steer away from certain topics. At one stage it was said in Tai that the foreigner ought under no circumstance been told about the fact that there were two men in the village who had all the information he was searching for. The interview ended in a realisation by both parties that a stalemate had been reached. At that point, when parting I casually asked for various names of householders living in farms around and, in this manner I located one of the persons who had been mentioned as knowledgeable on sacrifices. The fact that my knowledge of the Siamese language had been useful to me was brought home when I asked to see if that particular man would be available for a short talk. Fortunately for this research the person in question was sitting on his verandah and the elders, realising that they could not stop me from contacting him, decided to accompany me in the hope of maintaining their stance. Before the new interviewee could be warned off I told him that I had been directed to him as one of the few persons with true knowledge on the subject of animal sacrifices. Quickly and business-like this man described the rituals which used to be held in his father's days. The "ignorant" elders, finding the embarrassing deadlock broken even began to volunteer some details of their own.

It is clear that this particular part of the research could only be done by prising away some of the community's secrets. It shows the work of an anthropologist from an unpleasant angle. Most of the time, however, information is not as difficult to obtain. In this instance it may be asked whether it would not have been better to leave the Assamese Tai alone regarding their traditional blood sacrifices and conduct research on aspects of Tai customs which people would discuss more freely and readily. The answer, I believe, is negative, for several reasons.

Firstly, in this case the degree of the informants' embarrassment is generally not excessive. In some of the interviews there were Assamese Tai who readily divulged details of sacrificial rituals. In the majority of cases, once the ice was broken, people became quite willing to speak on the subject. All the time it was clearly understood by all that the information was to be used in a comparative study of Tai customs and that it would be published. Once the information had been given, people appeared quite happy with the idea that it would find its way into a written report. Therefore the publication involves no breach of confidence.

In the second place the research on these sacrificial traditions proves to be of considerable interest when they are seen in a wider perspective. The ceremonial details often provide clues regarding the degree of homogeneity of the Tai culture. The analysis throws some light upon a key area of traditional Tai religion and this information cannot be obtained elsewhere. The subject of ritual slaughter is also of particular interest because Buddhist doctrine is so opposed to this feature of many non-Buddhist religions. The establishment of an approximate date when animal sacrifices were stopped may provide a criterium for establishing the moment when Buddhism gains predominance over traditional pre-Buddhist religion. That this may have occurred comparatively recently amongst the Assamese Tai is of interest to the student of comparative religion.

## Sacrificial rituals of the Khamyang

a) *The sacrifice for Phii Mueang, or Raaz Daew*

The most important Khamyang sacrificial ritual about which information could be obtained is the one which was held for their guardian spirit Phii Mueang. Since most Khamyang who live in Assam have forgotten the Tai language the ceremony is often better understood as Raaz Daew, an Assamese expression which conveys the meaning that the festival is held for the community spirit. The fact that such a ritual existed amongst the Khamyang came as a surprise to the researcher when he first heard about it. In the first place there is no mention of the ritual in the literature on Assamese Tai. Secondly, as explained above, blood sacrifices appear acts unlikely to have been performed relatively recently amongst peoples who are at present set apart from other Assamese by their strict adherence to Buddhism.

The researcher first became aware of Raaz Daew during the last days of his first period of research amongst the Assamese Tai, in January 1979 when an elderly Khamyang informant casually referred to blood sacrifices which he himself had witnessed some fifty years ago at Chalapathar. Not long afterwards a group of villagers were questioned on the matter and the bare outline of the ceremony was revealed. Since the ritual had not been performed at Chalapathar for half a century, and since all eyewitnesses to these events had been but youngsters at that time, there was a certain measure of vagueness and occasionally the informants disagreed amongst themselves regarding the details. One area of disagreement was the actual time of the year when Raaz Daew used to take place. Whilst one informant thought that it occurred just before Sangkhen, the traditional New Year festival which is celebrated at mid-April,<sup>2</sup> others were of the opinion that it used to take place just after that point in time. There was agreement, however, on the fact that on and around the day of Raaz Daew the whole village was closed to outsiders, and that secular activities were kept to a minimum. Just outside the village of Chalapathar there was a huge banyan tree and before Raaz Daew an area between its spectacular root system was swept clean. The main ceremony would be held during an afternoon and be concluded at dusk. Central to the ritual was the killing of a pig and some fowls. The pig's liver was taken aside, it was placed on a piece of banana leaf and closely examined by someone with ritual knowledge. If there were any discolourings or other abnormalities in the liver this would be taken as a bad omen and troublesome times could be expected. If the liver looked healthy a good year lay ahead. All Chalapathar informants agreed on the facts that women were not allowed to attend Raaz Daew and that the whole sacrificial site was out of bounds for all females. One informant elaborated on this and considered that all sacrificial meat had to be eaten on the spot and that none could be taken home, but others disagreed and recollected that it could be shared amongst all family members at home.

During the second period of fieldwork in the first three months of 1980 many Khamyang informants were approached with a naim to unearth

<sup>2</sup> The Khamyang word Sangkhen is Southeast Asian peoples, but, as will apparently derived from the Sanskrit become clear in Part B of this book, it is Samkranti. It is at present taken as the not the Ancient Tai moment for the beginning of the first month.

more details of this ceremony. Further information on Raaz Daew was obtained from the villages of Disangpani, Rohon, Powai Mukh and from a single informant hailing from the Golaghat region of Sibsagar District. In the following pages an account will be given of the general findings. These are the result of a careful process of reconstruction. The report consists of an account of the various details which various Khamyang informants could add, but also a report on some local variations.

An important feature on which all Khamyang ritual specialists agreed regarding Raaz Daew is that the ceremony was always held in honour of two Khamyang warriors, named Khun Haang and Khun Chaang. These famous men reputedly lived in the days of the earliest Khamyang travels from their homeland in the northern part of what is now called Burma to the region now called Assam. According to oral history the leader of the first group to set out was a certain Li Khii of the Chaochai clan.<sup>3</sup> Li Khii and his band of followers did not succeed in reaching the Brahmaputra Valley and they were forced to settle somewhere in the Naga foothills southwest of the Patkai range and accept the overlordship of a Naga leader whose name survives in Khamyang lore as Honsaa. Here they appeared doomed to be absorbed into the Naga culture and this might have happened had not representatives of the Paangyok and of the Tungkhang clans returned to their mother country and reported on their plight. The Khamyang leaders at home decided then to send Puu Khun Khiew<sup>4</sup> and the two famous warriors Khun Haang and Khun Chaang.<sup>5</sup> Arriving at Honsaa's stronghold, the two Khamyang heroes decided upon a ruse and pretended to be willing to join their weaker Tai brothers and partake in the Naga religious rites which were at that moment being prepared near a sacred tree. However, once they were admitted in the vicinity of that tree, Khun Haang and Khun Chaang suddenly attacked the sanctuary and managed to break off the tree's main branch. During the following turmoil and consternation the Khamyang attacked and put their enemy to flight, leaving Khun Haang and Khun Chaang in full possession. Subsequently a large victory celebration was organised during which much rice-wine was consumed. Eventually the two leaders became rather overcome with food and drink. The Naga warriors had been watching this from a distance and chose this moment for a counter-attack. Khun Haang and Khun Chaang were amongst those captured. Although they were severely tortured, at first their magic enabled them to withstand all pain. Eventually, however, the enemy discovered their vulnerable spots, and from the moment that Khun Haang and Khun Chaang were emasculated<sup>6</sup> they began to die. Just before their demise<sup>7</sup> Khun Haang and Khun Chaang proclaimed that, after having left this earthly existence, they would become guardians of their people. If henceforth any Khamyang

<sup>3</sup> Details about the Khamyang clans can be found in Volume I, Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as Chao Khun Khiew Mueang of the Thaomung clan.

<sup>5</sup> In one recorded version Khun Haang and Khun Chaang were already present amongst the first group of Khamyang who had set out under Li Khii.

<sup>6</sup> Often the story is told without revealing the exact nature of the vulnerability. This aspect may be relevant regarding the women's exclusion as will be explained below.

<sup>7</sup> In one version, Khun Haang and Khun Chaang communicated their offer of assistance only after their death to one of the survivors via a dream.

would need magical help and protection they should remember Khun Haang and Khun Chaang and assistance would not be withheld. From this time onwards it became customary amongst the Assamese Khamyang groups to remember the two warriors during the yearly Phii Mueang or Raaz Daew celebrations and altars were set up to offer parts of the animal sacrifice to Khun Haang and Khun Chaang.

One Khamyang informant added that traditionally Khun Haang and Khun Chaang should also be invoked in the particular case when a man found himself in conflict with the king. Here probably representatives of the Ahom royal power was probably meant, for when the Khamyang first came to Assam the Ahoms ruled supreme. If a Khamyang individual found himself in danger of being arrested and brought before the king, he was well-advised to go to the sacred tree outside his village, make a sacrifice to Khun Haang and Khun Chaang and ask for their aid and guidance.

The story of Khun Haang and Khun Chaang is encountered amongst all Assamese Khamyang groups, and hitherto none of the Phakey or Khamti people whom the names were told could remember ever having heard about them. It is quite probable that there exists a firm historical basis for the story. The Khamyang appear to have entered Assam at a point much further to the southwest than the other Tai groups coming into the Brahmaputra Valley. It is therefore quite likely that they experienced difficulties with Naga peoples before they finally reached what is now called the Golaghat region, from where they later migrated in various stages to their present locations. It is quite plausible that some Khamyang leaders fought the Naga, were captured and tortured to death and that these warriors later became remembered during the traditional yearly sacrificial ritual.

Regarding the time when Raaz Daew was last performed, the data from the second period of fieldwork show that there was some variation between different Khamyang villages. In Disangpani, just like in the neighbouring Chalapathar, people remembered that the sacrifices had been stopped some fifty years ago. Also in Powai Mukh no specific date for the last Raaz Daew could be reconstructed. At Powai Mukh the situation was complicated by the fact that a local development had taken place so that the Raaz Daew ceremony had been supplanted by a sacrifice for a female guardian spirit, Naang Hua Tong, about whom more below. For Rohon village a more specific date was established for it became clear that Raaz Daew had only been held once, shortly after the village had been founded in 1919, sixty-one years before the time when the interview was held. Soon afterwards a Buddhist temple was built at Rohon and the communal sacrifices were supplanted by rituals sanctioned by the Buddhist ethos. The Khamyang community for which it was established that Raaz Daew had continued until relatively recently was that of Sarupathar in the Golaghat region where it was held for the last time just after the Second World War. Apparently people there had been reluctant to stop the yearly sacrifice for fear of courting disaster by displeasing the guardian spirits.

As to the time of the year when Raaz Daew had been held, it has already been noted that Chalapathar informants were divided in their opinions on whether the ceremony took place just before or after Sangkhen. On this point some inhabitants of Disangpani volunteered the information that the



ritual was always held around January or February and that a delay beyond the month of February would cause the displeasure of the gods and the village would risk severe storms. From these and other details it became clear that regarding this date the informants may have confused the date of Sarok Daew, another Khamyang sacrifice about which more below, with that of Raaz Daew. This was confirmed when it was established for Rohon as well as for Powai Mukh that Raaz Daew was always held in April, and that it fell just after Sangkhen. A new aspect regarding the matter of when Raaz Daew was held is the fact that both in Rohon and in Powai Mukh it was suddenly remembered that the ritual could be held a second time each year, namely in October, six months after the first celebration.

In Chalapathar it was thought that the ritual killing would take place in the afternoon and that the ceremony would be concluded at dusk. Information from other Khamyang villages tended to confirm the time of beginning the ritual, but often it was thought that the ceremonies once proceeded until late in the night or until daybreak the next morning. In general it seems that the ritual was considered to have lasted longer in distant times and that more recently the Raaz Daew rituals appeared to have taken less and less time. This is not altogether an unexpected finding, for by the time the people performed the sacrifice for the last time there must have been already considerable pressures to discontinue the ritual.

In all Khamyang communities it was remembered that on and around the Raaz Daew festival there were days which were called *wan kam*, during which not only was the village closed to outsiders, but also during which villagers themselves could not go out. All agricultural pursuits were forbidden on such days. The number of *kam* days for the Phii Mueang festival was reported to have been three days as a minimum and seven days as a maximum. In Sarupathar the whole village was surrounded by a cotton thread and the main entrance to the community was sealed off by a gate.

The report by villagers in Chalapathar that Raaz Daew could not be attended by women was confirmed for all other Khamyang communities. In Powai Mukh, where the festival for the lady-spirit Naang Hua Tong had come to supplant Raaz Daew, it was said that even at the ritual for Naang Hua Tong no females were allowed to attend. This exclusion of women appears to be a typical aspect of Raaz Daew and related festivals, for at no other sacrifices were Khamyang women barred entrance. It is possible that the fact that amongst the Khamyang Raaz Daew has become linked with the history of Khun Haang and Khun Chaang is the cause of this strange prohibition. Possibly the details of their gruesome death were once considered taboo for women.

In all reported cases Raaz Daew was held outside the actual village. Like the ritual at Chalapathar, that at Rohon and at Disangpani was conducted at the foot of a huge banyan tree or, if such a tree was not available, another gigantic forest tree would be chosen. At Sarupathar there was a fixed, permanent shrine nearby a big tree, but at Powai Mukh only such a shrine outside the village could be remembered and no tree was mentioned. Amongst those communities where there was no fixed shrine, a place was cleared at the foot of the tree; the leaves and branches were carefully swept aside so as to form a clear boundary between forest and

offering site. Then a *saang* was built; a temporary altar consisting of a covered wooden frame held up by various small posts to a height of approximately thirty or forty centimetres. On the whole the shape was not unlike a narrow bed, a long side of which formed the front. On this oblong altar often four separate offering places were made, two for Khun Haang and Khun Chaang and two for the Phii Mueang. The temporary altar was provided at the front with a miniature stairway which had nine rungs. There was no roof. At those villages where a permanent shrine had been established (in Khamyang Tai such a shrine is called a *hucan phil*), this consisted of a small roofed-over house with an altar inside. Reputedly, a small wooden pole, called *lak*, decorated at the top in the shape of a bud of the banana flower, was placed at a central place of this altar. In order to prevent the pole from falling over, one informant remembered, it was embedded in a base made of clay. In Powai Mukh the number of separate offering places on the altar for Phii Mueang used to be greater than the four reported for temporary shrines, for a total of sixteen individual offerings had to be prepared for a great number of powers and their mythological helpers. These offering places were thus divided in two tiers, one for the gods and one for the lesser powers.

The usual sacrifices for Raaz Daew were described as a black boar as main offering and further some cocks, hens and possibly also ducks. On one occasion a Khamyang informant explained how two poles, firmly planted in the ground, were needed to hold a sacrificial buffalo, so that it may safely be assumed that buffalo sacrifice was not unknown to this group. The Raaz Daew ritual was usually celebrated with the offering of a pig. The fact that it was specified that the pig needs to be black may not necessarily be regarded as information of special ritual significance. After all, it is the colour of all domestic pigs of that region. Later in this book it is argued that the mention of the colour may be a reminder to the people to select a beast with an even colour, one which shows no deformities. All animals were killed just outside the swept area in the forest, or just outside the permanent shrine, as the case may be. As to the method of killing, the pig was held on its back by four men, each clutching a leg, whilst a fifth rapidly cut its throat. The birds were killed by cutting off the head. In all cases care was taken to collect blood in various containers. The person officiating in the ritual, the one who addressed the gods, usually was the one performing the actual sacrifice.

The animals were then divided up, and the boar's liver as well as those of the birds were carefully examined. Any discolouring, tear or scar boded evil for the future of the village. Only the ritual specialist would be able to predict in quite some detail what lay ahead by reading the signs in the liver. There were occasionally different techniques used to look in the future. In Powai Mukh special attention was given to the manner in which the oil lamps, which were placed at each god's platter, burned. In Sarupathar people could find out what lay in store by listening to a person who became possessed by one of the gods.

The meat was prepared in the vicinity of the altar. Only the entrails were thrown away, the boar's other inedible parts, such as paws, skull and

ears were placed on the altar, together with the containers of blood and the liver. With respect to the birds, all the heads, wings and legs would find their way to the sacrificial platters. In the clearest descriptions of the altar it was mentioned that for each invited god a banana-leaf-plate was put on the altar and on this leaf would be placed an oil-lamp, two pieces of areca nut rolled in a cone of betel leaf (the particular way of presenting areca nut which is known in Assamese as *thuria tamul*), as well as parts of the sacrificed animals and a container with rice-wine. Some of the informants could also remember a general platter upon which each family head would offer an uncut areca nut. The whole nut symbolises a formal welcome, and this platter may be regarded as a token of the formal bond between the families of the community and the gods who have been invited. The *thuria tamul* must be regarded as a completely different symbol. It is the common accompaniment to a good meal, it is there to show to the gods that they are offered not only meat and alcohol, but also the substances which round off a feast.

The officiating priest would address the various powers at length, offering them the pig, the cocks, hens and ducks, imploring them to continue looking after the community, to ward off disasters and to help bring prosperity and happiness. Not long after this prayer the time for distributing the cooked meats came, and all the men would receive an equal share of the meat, the other foods which may have been offered, and the rice wine. These were eaten together. It has been described how informants at Chalapathar disagreed as to whether food could be taken home. This problem was solved during the subsequent interviews. It became clear that the food distribution was only to those present at the ritual, and that no man could claim a larger share than the others simply because he had more womenfolk awaiting him at home. However, once the food had been distributed, some men could decide to save some of their portion and carry it home. That would be a purely private matter to be decided by each man for himself. Therefore the two apparently opposing statements from Chalapathar can be reconciled, the one informant must have alluded to the formal rules, the other to the actual practice.

It has already been mentioned that at Powai Mukh a variant upon the Phii Mueang ritual has developed, and that this is called the worship of Naang Hua Tong. Naang Hua Tong is a female spirit, literally her name can be translated as "the lady with the golden head". She is believed to be the defender of the community, she protects against war and danger and ever since she has become the guardian of the village the people of Powai Mukh have changed their former Phii Mueang ritual into one suited to her. In the past the Naang Hua Tong ritual began in the afternoon and it lasted right through the night until the next dawn, but in the much simplified version in which blood sacrifices have been substituted with gifts of fruit and incense, the whole ceremony is finished before dark. Naang Hua Tong is still remembered twice a year at Powai Mukh. Just like the old Raaz Daew, the ceremonies for Naang Hua Tong take place at the *huan phii* outside the village. The first occasion for such a ritual falls just after Sangkhen and the second moment for remembering her is six months later. During the ceremony for Naang Hua Tong a total of seven individual platters are prepared and offered by the priest, a basic difference with the Raaz Daew at this village during which sixteen gifts adorned the altar. The number



seven is related to the fact that Naang Hua Tong is reputedly one of seven sisters. The names of the other six could not be remembered by the villagers, they were not considered important, only Naang Hua Tong in her role of village guardian was of great importance. In the past the rituals for the lady defender involved the offering of sacrificial meat and rice-wine. The blood was offered to the goddess first and then it would be used in the cooking. Livers, birds' wings and birds' legs would be roasted on a spit. Up to the present day the custom of declaring a *wan kam* for Naang Hua Tong is observed. The village is then surrounded by a cotton thread, no strangers can enter and no villagers are allowed to leave. On such a day the early morning is exceptionally quiet, for the customary sound of the pounding of rice for a day's consumption is absent.

It is therefore clear that all Khamyang traditionally shared the custom of regular communal sacrifices. It appears that the most important occasion for doing so was in late April and that a second occasion was in October. Essential features of the ritual were the killing of a boar and a number of fowls and ducks, the presentation of these offerings to the guardian spirits, the request for continued protection and the consulting of omens. The ritual was concluded with a communal meal during which the meat of the sacrificed animals was eaten and rice-wine drunk. Only men could attend this ritual. Raaz Daew sacrifices have long been stopped in all Khamyang villages. Only a vague reminder of them can be found in the food offerings to Naang Hua Tong. There is yet another trace of Raaz Daew in present-day Khamyang ritual. This concerns the sand pyramids of the Khamyang, called *cetii kong mu*, which have been mentioned in some detail in Volume I. In Khamyang communities these *cetii kong mu* can be erected at any time in private compounds, but there is also a large communal one, set up somewhere outside the village or near the monastery grounds. This great communal *cetii kong mu* is cleaned up and redecorated twice a year, namely just after Sangkhen and in October. These times are the same as those which were traditionally set apart for Raaz Daew. More important for our study, however, is the fact that just after decorating the communal pyramid a Buddhist service is held to commemorate the ancestors, and two ancestors which feature large in this service are no other than the heroes Khun Haang and Khun Chaang. The timing of this communal ritual, together with the fact that Khun Haang and Khun Chaang are publicly worshipped make it feasible that aspects of the old Raaz Daew ceremony have found their way to the *cetii kong mu* and are re-enacted in Buddhist garb.<sup>8</sup>

#### b) The sacrifice for Phii Faa, or Sarok Daew

When discussing their long-abandoned sacrificial rites, Khamyang informants often refer to those which were held in honour of Phii Faa, the "spirit of the sky". In Assamese the ritual for Phii Faa is known as Sarok Daew, in which *sarok* is apparently derived from the Sanskrit word *swarga*, "heaven".

<sup>8</sup> Since writing Volume I an interesting ethnographic account of ritual pyramids in Laos and Thailand has been published. This is L. Gabaude, *Les cetiya de sable au Laos et en Thaïlande*, Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, Volume

CXVIII, Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1979. The fact that the Khamyang share the custom of erecting sand *cetiyas* is of great interest and details of Khamyang rituals may throw light upon the meaning of certain aspects of the rituals.

In the local custom of identifying Tai spirits with gods of the Indian pantheon, a custom which in the case of the Khamyang went hand in hand with the internalisation of Buddhism, Phii Faa is also equated with Indra. Sarok Daew is also a ritual which has long been discontinued. Nevertheless it is quite easily distinguished from Raaz Daew, for Sarok Daew differs from Raaz Daew in that it is held amongst a relatively small group of people, the ritual takes place in the region where houses are built, the animals sacrificed are not the same and the time of the year is not linked with Sangkhen.

Whilst Raaz Daew was a ritual organised for the benefit of the whole community, Sarok Daew was basically a family ritual which could be attended only by the people living in one house, or at most by a group of people from different households who were closely related to each other. It was customary to hold the ritual once a year in order to ensure the continued welfare of the family. It was best to hold the ceremony around end January when the harvest was in and people had time to consider matters of family welfare. However, if January proved inconvenient or if the ritual had been postponed for some domestic reason, some other time of the year could be chosen, each family deciding itself when the moment was appropriate. A clear sign that Sarok Daew was overdue would be if during a thunderstorm lightning would strike uncomfortably near the house. This was taken as a sign that Phii Faa was unhappy about something and needed a placatory gift. As is described below, Phii Faa was rather easily offended. However, this sky god could also be called in to assist in certain family matters. Thus it was reported that in one Khamyang village a man who had only daughters and who wished to ensure that his next child was born a son, approached Phii Faa with the request to make sure that no more girls arrived in the family. Apparently the request had been granted.

The proper place for holding Sarok Daew was at the family *nii saang*, a shrine built especially for that purpose in the compound. All Khamyang houses once used to have a permanent *nii saang*, a small altar raised off the ground on stilts above which a leaf roof was fixed. It could be found facing the southern, frontal side of the main house. These *nii saangs* can no longer be found in Khamyang villages in Assam, only a few of the oldest inhabitants can remember having seen one. However, in traditional farm houses there is still a modern version of the shrine, also called *nii saang*. Nowadays this is built as an attachment to the open verandah which can be found at the southern side of the house. Usually this "modern" type of *nii saang* is built under the eaves at the eastern corner of the verandah and its main opening faces west. A present-day *nii saang* may contain a small Buddha image or some pictures with scenes from the life of Siddhartha Gautama. If the *nii saang* is large enough it may also hold some ritual containers which may be used to offer fruit and flowers during Buddhist ceremonies.

There can be little doubt as to the fact that the *nii saang* in present-day Khamyang verandahs is derived from a shrine which used to be built in the compound. In the first place the verandah shrine is always found at the southern side of the building, the same side which was reserved for the original *nii saang*. Secondly, the shrine on the verandah juts out of the building, it is not incorporated in its basic structure. The shrine appears to hang separately like a box added as an architectural afterthought. There

is yet a third reason why the verandah shrine appears to be the direct successor of the *nii saang* upon which sacrificial offerings to Phii Faa used to be placed. This concerns the fact that regarding both types of *nii saang* there were similar prohibitions at moments of ritual impurity. When the customs of the past were discussed it was established that the old type *nii saang* sometimes was separated from the rest of the compound by a bamboo pole which was laid in a north-south direction across the path leading there. This was done during all times of ritual uncleanness, when a girl reached puberty, when a woman in the family menstruated, during the first weeks after birth or during the period of mourning immediately after a death has occurred in the family. On all these occasions the bamboo pole would be placed across the path and the shrine would be effectively isolated from all members of the household until the period of ritual isolation was over. During the periods of impurity it was impossible to hold rituals at the *nii saang*. Naturally this explains why the moment for holding Sarok Daew could not be prescribed with exactitude and why each family decides for itself when to hold it. The interesting link with present-day shrines at the verandah is that the new type also cannot be approached during days of ritual pollution.

The old *nii saang* in front of the house was used, not only for the annual ceremony of Sarok Daew, but also to inform the Phii Faa of family matters. After a wedding the newly married couple had to pay respect at this *nii saang*. A member of the household going on a long journey would be advised to pray there for a safe return.

The yearly Sarok Daew ceremony would be attended by all members of the family, including women and children. The spokesman for the family would be the oldest male or another senior family member capable of politely addressing the Phii Faa. If there was no such person in the family, or if there was reason to suspect that Phii Faa was extremely displeased and punishing one or more people in the house, a ritual specialist could be invited to preside. It should be understood, however, that normally speaking all adult males ought to be able to lead the ceremonies at the *nii saang*. Sarok Daew involved the sacrifice of an animal. The largest animal ever offered to Phii Faa would be a pig, but the offering which traditionally was believed to be most suitable for Sarok Daew was that of a white cock. Great care had to be taken not to let the white cock make any sound whilst he was being killed, for that was believed to cause Phii Faa's ire. The animal was then plucked, chopped into pieces and cooked. The best portions, together with rice-wine, were placed on the *nii saang*. The presiding man then would address the god. One elderly informant vaguely remembered the first words of a suitable incantation for this occasion and recited: "Chao kao, chao kao, jhowaa phaa luu, jhowaa phaa luu..."<sup>9</sup> During the prayer Phii Faa was invited to come and partake of the offering, a white cock being presented, and he was requested to bless and protect the household. It could be remembered that the man presiding over the Sarok Daew ceremony would wear a cotton towel (Assamese: *gamusa*)<sup>10</sup> wrapped like a turban around his head. Undoubtedly this is a reminder of the fact that Khamyang men, like all Tai, traditionally wore turbans on all official

<sup>9</sup> The first words are recognisable as: of the other syllables has been lost.  
 "Our Lord, Our Lord", but the meaning <sup>10</sup> The *gamusa* is usually white and has

occasions. The Sarok Daew ritual would be concluded in the evening with a hearty family meal during which the white cock's meat would be shared by all.

c) *Sacrifices for Phii Huean, or Ghor Daew*

The only other sacrifice that could be recollected by the Khamyang was that for the Phii Huean, or "house gods",<sup>11</sup> which in Assamese was known as Ghor Daew. Sacrifices for the Phii Huean consisted usually of fowls, and these were presented to the house gods at the *sao phii lang*, the most important house post which can be found at the eastern side of an inner room. The house gods were one and the same as the ancestors. They would receive such gifts regularly. There was no fixed time of the year which could be remembered as being particularly suitable for such offers. Like the sacrifice for Phii Faa, the ceremony could be held by the householder himself and no outside ritual specialist would have to be invited. A remarkable detail of the sacrifice for the Phii Huean, which was mentioned on several occasions, was that the animal's blood was collected in some container and that some of this blood was sprinkled by the officiant, using his left hand, near the *sao phii lang*. This sprinkling had to be done three times.

**Sacrificial rituals of the Phahey**

a) *The sacrifice for Phii Suea Mueang, or Sum Daew*

The recollection of former sacrifices amongst the Phahey was much vaguer than that amongst the Khamyang. This may be taken as yet further evidence for the idea that Khamyang and Phahey traditions were fully separate Tai cultures which for centuries had not been in close contact with one another. In Tipam Phahey village our chief informant did not deny the possibility that animal sacrifices had once been held, but at the same time there was nobody to be found who had witnessed them and could supply ritual details. In the other major Phahey community of Namphahey there might be people able to assist, for there lived some individuals interested in ancient customs. At the time of the Tipam interview I had already repeatedly visited Namphahey and all the information summarised in this section derives from there.

At Namphahey it was asserted that once a year there used to be held a communal sacrifice for a power called Phii Suea Mueang, also known by an Assamese appellation Sum Daew.<sup>12</sup> Phii Suea Mueang refers to the

at one end a decoration consisting of embroidery in red. It is an integral part of the general Assamese culture and used often to present to a guest as a sign of honour and welcoming.

<sup>11</sup> Not to be confused with the *huan phii*, mentioned above.

<sup>12</sup> The concept Sum Daew is also known in discussions about the oldest Ahom religion. Reputedly Sum Daew was an image of a god made of precious stone. It was of immense value and the Ahom kings used to worship it. Many people believe that the image was lost prior to the British period. However, there are

also many people of Tai descent who believe that the priceless treasure is still guarded in a particular family and that during the full moon night end March/beginning April the custodian will take the image from its secret hiding place, will put it on his head and show it to his circle of trusted disciples. Hitherto nobody has been able to throw light upon this report, and I am also not able to elucidate it. However, the act of placing an image on the head suggests the possibility that the image is a mask. Yearly dances in which sacred ancestral masks are shown have been reported for Laos and Vietnam. However, this remains pure speculation.

gods guarding the whole community. This sacrifice was the most elaborate Phakey sacrifice during which a buffalo, a pig, as well as fowls were killed. For Sum Daew all the animals had to be white in colour. However, if a white buffalo were not available, one informant volunteered, it was possible to place a white cloth over the sacrificial animal, thus creating the impression of a white offering. There was no other Phakey sacrifice involving the killing of a buffalo that could be remembered.

As to the question whether women were allowed to attend the rituals for Phii Suea Mueang, there appeared to be no restrictions comparable to those encountered amongst the Khamyang. Only in the event of a woman being far advanced in pregnancy she would be well advised not to attend. The ritual is still held at Namphakey, but Sum Daew no longer involves killing animals. Nowadays flowers and candles are presented to the gods.

*b) The sacrifice for Phii Hung*

One of the standard questions of the interview consisted of a list of animals comprising beings such as goat, dog, cat, snake and lizard, and asking whether these were ever sacrificed. Quite unexpectedly, a Phakey informant suddenly halted at the mention of a dog and told that, under very special circumstances a red dog used to be sacrificed and offered to Phii Hung.

A dog sacrifice would only be considered when there had been a disastrous epidemic which had lasted for over a year and which continued unabatedly into its second year. When the decision was made to hold a red dog sacrifice, the village's astrologers first decided upon an auspicious day. Then they selected a number of villagers who would have to perform the ritual for the welfare of the whole community. The number of men selected to do this task had to be either five or nine. These men had to appear personally; they were selected for their personal qualities and were not there as representatives of a section of the populace. Hence a close relative was not allowed to take the place of one of these chosen men.

On the appointed day each of them would take an early morning bath. Then each prepared to take all his ritual paraphernalia. This included a handful of uncooked rice from each of the afflicted households and also from those houses where nobody was ill. These two types of rice were kept separately. The men would then take hold of the selected dog with the reddish coat and tied it on a leash. The animal was pulled in various directions and the one in which it was prepared to walk was taken as the proper one the whole party had to take. They proceeded until they were at some distance from the village and until they found a big tree on their path. At the foot of this tree a space was cleared of branches and leaves. During the sacrifice no altar was constructed, no mats or domestic containers were used, only material derived from plants in the immediate surroundings would serve, with the exception of two bundles of thatch which had been prepared beforehand. These two bundles were put down in the cleared space, one bundle placed over the other in such a manner that together they formed an "X" sign. The rice from the houses where the sickness raged was kept close by these bundles of thatch. Then the men addressed Phii Hung in a chanting voice, requesting this spirit to cause the village's misfortunes to disappear and to accept this gift of a red dog. The dog was



laid over the thatch and killed. Parts of the dog, such as the liver, were then roasted over an open fire, and the dog's meat was brought back to the village. The persons most seriously afflicted by the contagious disease might already have specified which portion of the sacrifice they wished to consume, but in the event that a person was too sick to do so, or too young to voice such a wish, a piece was selected for him. According to the tradition a cure was bound to follow soon.

The men who had performed the ceremony were received back into the village with many precautions reminiscent of ritual pollution. Thus, they were not greeted or approached by any of the other villagers. A set of freshly laundered clothing would have been placed next to a large bowl of water outside their home, so that each man could bathe and change before stepping into his own house. Each of these men would refrain from eating food, consuming only some tea, and they had to spend the night separate from their families. Only the next morning could they join in the family breakfast and resume their former positions.

### **Sacrificial rituals of the Khamti**

#### *a) Sacrifices for Phii Mueang*

In Borkhamti Gaon several types of sacrifices could be remembered, albeit vaguely, and of these that in honour of Phii Mueang was by far the most important. As far as could be ascertained it was held for the whole community only once a year. No specific season was mentioned, just that it was held at a time when it was convenient for all. The festivities began one afternoon and lasted throughout the following night until daylight the next morning. Outsiders could not attend, the village being closed during the ritual. The last time the ritual had been held in the community was in the year which began in April 1925. There was no restriction regarding the attendance of women and children other than the general prohibition for menstruating women on attending religious ceremonies. The place for holding a yearly Phii Mueang sacrifice was somewhere outside the actual village, not necessarily near a tree. Any convenient place, preferably one near a stream so that water for cooking would be near, could be chosen.

As to the animals sacrificed during the Phii Mueang rituals, pigs, ducks, fowls and pigeons were readily listed. After some hesitation it was mentioned that the Phii Mueang ritual could sometimes also be the scene of a buffalo sacrifice. In the latter case, two poles firmly planted in the ground and tied together at the top were used to hold the head of the buffalo. No special significance was given to the colour of the animals. A villager with the appropriate knowledge was the presiding priest, and according to the informants he could hail from any of the many Khamti clans.

On the day of the ceremony the whole community would be busy with the general preparations. Some cooked large quantities of food, others collected the many containers with rice-wine. The elderly men would generally assist the priest with supervision of the preparations for the religious ceremony. The killing of the sacrificial animals took place late in the afternoon and great care was taken to collect the blood from the sacrificed animals. Each householder brought a container for this purpose, and



also there would have been taken along some pieces of cloth as well as the ropes used for tethering cattle. The blood was wiped over the cloth and ropes. The bamboo-netting baskets in which ducks, fowls and pigeons had been brought would also be wiped with sacrificial blood. These baskets were later taken back to the farms and hung in the cow sheds, in pig sties or near poultry roosts. This wiping with sacrificial blood was considered of great importance, for in this manner it was believed that for the duration of a year a general type of protection was acquired. A final detail which could be remembered was that areca nuts and betel leaf were not found amongst the gifts to Phii Mueang; in the eyes of the people of Borkhamti Gaon betel was not an appropriate gift to the gods. Rice-wine, however, was prominent amongst the gifts.

#### *b) Other sacrifices*

Amongst the other sacrifices which could be recollected were those for the Phii Huean, which consisted of the killing of domestic animals in order to honour the house spirits. This was purely a family affair. The flesh would be cooked and eaten by all family members. Other sacrifices were those connected with the elaborate funeral rites of the past, during which buffaloes, pigs and fowls were often killed.

### OVERVIEW

From the above summary of findings it may be concluded that the Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti each had a sacrificial tradition and that these customs have all been discontinued. Each village abandoned its large-scale communal sacrifice at its own time, but in general all the dates for the final performances of these communal rituals fall within the first half of this century. This constitutes an interesting fact which is indicative of increasing influence of Buddhism vis a vis these aspects of Tai customs which appear to belong to pre-Buddhist beliefs and practices. The information which could be gathered on the subject of blood sacrifices appears rather scanty for the amount of interviews that were devoted on this topic and the large number of people who have given accounts of their personal observations. Probably this reflects the fact that the sacrificial traditions were already in decline long before the final communal sacrifices were enacted. What here has been reconstructed may therefore well constitute the last remnants of a more varied and richer set of traditions.

From the facts which were established it has become clear that there are both similarities and differences amongst the three groups. Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti peoples celebrated at regular intervals, once or twice a year, an animal offer which was dedicated in all cases to the guardian spirit of the realm, called Phii Mueang or Phii Suca Mueang. In all instances the ceremony was held outside the actual village. Everywhere the largest possible sacrifice for this occasion was deemed to be a buffalo, though a pig was more commonly the main offer. In all instances it was deemed important to collect blood.

Apart from these similarities in these rather general areas, it was clear that there were also considerable differences in what has been recorded for

the three groups. The Khamyang share amongst each other a belief in two folk heros who are included in the powers invoked at the communal feast. These two heros are unknown to Phakey and Khamti. The Khamyang prevent their women from attending the Raaz Daew ritual, but both other Tai groups have no restriction in that respect. The Khamyang *nii saang*, the permanent altar built at the south side of the ancient Khamyang house, was not encountered amongst the Phakey and Khamti. The differences recorded are not simply aspects which single out the Khamyang as different from both other groups. The Phakey, for example, have thus far been the only group where it was specified that white animals ought to be given to the guardian spirits. Of the three Tai peoples considered here the Phakey were the only group for which a red dog sacrifice could be reconstructed. The Khamti proved different from both other groups in the importance given to the wiping ritual.

Such differences are partly the result of the fact that Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti represent three distinct strands of Tai culture, each with its own history, and no known period of intimate contact or cultural exchange with one another. However, the dissimilarities may also be the result of the fact that so few details could be remembered, especially amongst Phakey and Khamti informants. It is, at least theoretically, quite possible that on a future occasion, in some isolated Khamti community the altar just outside the house is found. On a future occasion some venerable Khamyang specialist may recall a red dog sacrifice, or recollect that, if there were a need to be especially cautious regarding Phii Mueang, a white animal ought to be found and offered. There is little doubt that some of these recorded details go back a considerable time and may be related to a common Tai tradition. It would be tempting to relate the customs regarding the Khamyang *nii saang* with the Siamese *saan phra phuum*. Both types of shrine are found at some distance of the house and the types of information which is communicated at the shrines is similar. However, before such far-reaching conclusions might be drawn the cultural aspect in question must be subjected to the treatment set out in the Introduction. In other words, the aspect must be studied for all Tai peoples, similarities as well as differences must be recorded and analysed, local developments noted and the surrounding peoples' customs checked for cultural borrowing. The same applies to the Phakey red dog sacrifice, the Khamyang custom of holding a Phii Mueang sacrifice sometimes for a second time, and any other interesting detail recorded. Before deciding whether they fall within a general Tai pattern or whether they constitute divergences from the norm, a wide range of sacrificial customs must be noted. Following the pattern set in Volume I, first the customs of the Ahom shall be discussed and then the customs of various other Tai groups shall be presented, moving eastwards over the map of the relevant part of Asia.

## AHOM SACRIFICIAL RITUALS

## The historical background

In order to assess sacrificial customs which can be found amongst some present-day Ahom groups it is necessary to consider, in broad outline, relevant aspects of Ahom religious history. There can be little doubt that, when the Ahom entered Assam at the beginning of the thirteenth century, they came with their own native religion. Already in the earliest, mythological sections of some of the *Buranjis*, sacrifices are mentioned. Thus Lueng Don (Lengdon)<sup>1</sup>, one of the chief gods in the Ahom pantheon, is reported to have sent Puu Phii Sue (Puphishu) to the earth where he took his abode at a *tun rung*, or pipal tree, and Lueng Don admonishes the Tai rulers to make a buffalo sacrifice at the time of the eighth Tai month.<sup>2</sup> In a similar exhortation, the ancestors of the Ahom rulers were told to sacrifice an elephant at the end of their first year of rule, and then a cow and a buffalo in the subsequent year. This great royal yearly sacrifice reputedly should take place at the beginning of the fifth Tai month (corresponding to March/April, subject to the consideration in footnote 2 above). During this sacrifice, Lueng Don and a great number of other gods would descend to accept the offering. The performance of this ritual ensured a continuation of the heavenly protection.<sup>3</sup>

In the early sections of the *Buranjis* there are also clear indications of the fact that the Ahom used to practise chicken sacrifices and that they used the leg bones for predicting the future. Also there is a section of the published *Buranjis* which appears to be taken from a very old Tai law book in which traditional punishments for major social crimes are laid down. Of special interest for this study is that frequently the culprit had to perform a sacrifice. The animals specified were the buffalo, the cow, the ox and the pig. On one occasion the buffaloes and oxen offered to the gods as restitution after a serious breach of the law are described as animals of a white colour.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore there can be little doubt that during the thirteenth century a sacrifice traditionally formed an integral part of many Ahom ceremonies. According to oral history, even the name of the Patkai mountain range, which lies between northern Burma and Assam, is derived from the Ahom words *pat*, meaning "cut", or "sacrifice" and *kai*, meaning "chicken". Reputedly, when the Ahom leaders crossed the mountain range they made a truce with leaders of another ethnic group in the region. The contract was sealed by killing some cocks, dipping the swords in the cocks' blood

<sup>1</sup> On the transcription of Ahom words, see the *Note on transliteration* at the end of the introductory chapter of this volume.

<sup>2</sup> G. C. Barua (translator and editor), *Ahom Buranji*, p. 11. The eighth Ahom month at present corresponds to a solar

month which falls in June and July. Probably it refers here to an ancient Ahom lunar month which fell approximately at the same time.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-7.

whilst solemnly swearing friendship and drinking of the blood. It is by no means certain that the name Patkai indeed derives from that combination of Ahom words, though there is some corroborating evidence in favour of this.<sup>5</sup> Of special interest is the description of the ritual oath taking.

In the earliest history of the Ahom there are a few signs which indicate that Hinduization began not long after the Tai had reached the Brahmaputra Valley. However, Hindu influences in those early days may well have remained confined to court circles and the average Ahom probably continued to practise and develop a type of Tai religion. It was probably not until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century that developments in Assamese Hinduism began to have an impact upon Ahom culture. This was mainly the result of the popular movement which began with the teachings of the great Sankardeva and his chief disciple Madhavadeva. They preached Vaisnavism, and their followers worshipped Krisna, to the exclusion of all other deities. Sankardeva and his disciples frowned upon the past practices of blood sacrifices and the ritual use of alcoholic beverages. Offerings had to be purely vegetarian and non-intoxicating. Sankardeva derived at least part of his success from his brilliant innovative approach. He incorporated in his Vaisnavite rituals many features of Assamese folk music and dance. How deeply Sankardeva and his school of thought eventually penetrated Ahom culture is witnessed by an assessment of general Ahom religion at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Hamilton reports that three-quarters of the Ahom have adopted Hinduism, "chiefly as taught by the followers of Madhava Acharya."<sup>6</sup> Even today the form of Vaisnavism which was first introduced by Sankardeva is important amongst the Ahom. Its followers call themselves often Mahapurushias, or "of the great man" because they relate directly to Sankardeva. They call themselves Damodariyas if they follow the related interpretation of the Vaisnavite Damodardeva.<sup>7</sup>

However, as Hamilton already noticed, Vaisnavism as taught by the school of Sankardeva accounts for the chief part of Hinduized Ahom, but not for all of them. Around the beginning of the seventeenth century Aniruddhadeva founded a somewhat different interpretation of Vaisnavism. His followers are often known as Moamarias, or Mayamarias. This particular sect flourished during the eighteenth century amongst many different ethnic groups in Assam, including the Ahom, and its leaders were able to overthrow the government in 1769. The resulting social unrest and internal power struggles helped weaken the Ahom kingdom and this hastened the demise of Ahom power.

<sup>5</sup> In a book on Khasi history it is mentioned that the Patkai range is known to a few tribes as "U Lum ot syiat", or "a peak where a cock was sacrificed to the deities". See Hamlet Barch, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, University of Gauhati Ph.D. thesis, published by the author, 1967, p. 314. It is of course quite possible that the name is simply an Ahom translation of an older one with the same meaning and that the ritual described above does not reflect the true origin of

the name.

<sup>6</sup> S. K. Bhuyan (editor), *An Account of Assam, First Compiled in 1807-1814 by Francis Hamilton*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1963, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Damodariyas can be found particularly amongst the ancient noble families of the Ahom, according to Padmeswar Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, Gauhati: Publication Board, Assam, 1976, p. 41.

Not all Hinduized Ahom are Vaisnavites, however. There are also many Ahom Sakta worshippers who practise a goddess cult, devoted to Durga, Kali or Tara. Whilst the Vaisnavites generally forbid or frown upon blood sacrifices, the Saktas consider these an essential part of their religious observances. Under the banner of Sakta worship there are annually held sacrifices of birds, goats and even of buffaloes.<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that the first Ahom coins, which were struck in 1543, carry on the reverse in Ahom script the legend: "I, the king, offer prayers to Tara". This may well be taken as a sign of royal sponsorship of a Sakta movement in the sixteenth century. Sakta temples frequented by Ahom can still be found, and ritual sacrifices of goats, of ducks and of pigeons still take place there.

This does not conclude the range of Hindu sects common among the Ahom. There are at present a large number of Ahom who have been labelled Tantric Saivites.<sup>9</sup> Their sacrificial worship usually takes place at night and during their ceremonies all active roles are reserved to initiates, both men and women. They possess a rich store of devotional songs which they often combine with dance under the accompaniment of a few musical instruments. The consumption of rice-wine in a ritual manner comprises a good deal of the ceremony. An initiate will go around a circle of fellow-members of the sect, holding the wine bowl to each person's lips and three sips are taken whilst the rest of the gathering chants a few sentences in honour of the particular god, goddess, or other category of beings to whom the toast is devoted. This is not the place, however, to describe the rituals of this interesting sect of "night-worshippers". For the purpose of this book it suffices to mention that animal sacrifices are a regular feature of these religious meetings. For relatively unimportant occasions a few cocks, hens and ducks are offered. At large-scale rituals a black boar, a tortoise and thirty or forty birds may be offered. All these sacrifices form an integral part of the ritual. The animals are first formally presented to the gods. They are killed by strangulation whilst the congregation chants a devotional song, explaining the reason why the life is taken. The dead animals are carried to the kitchen accompanied by appropriate music and dance, and later in the night, when the preparation has been completed it is presented formally to the gods. Finally the dishes are shared amongst the devotees.

In this overview it has become clear that the many Hinduized Ahom do not form a homogenous religious group. There are many sects and sub-sects, each possessing its own temples and priests. There is considerable variation of beliefs and practices. Whilst some prefer to concentrate in all their religious ceremonies upon a single god and consider other gods to be often an emanation of their chosen one, others address themselves to different segments of the Indian pantheon. Whilst the Mahapurushas offer pulses and grains, some of the other groups regard a religious meeting incomplete without an animal sacrifice. Some forbid the use of alcohol, others consider it an essential item in their ceremonies. It is possible to recognise in this scala of Hindu practices two opposing views. On the one extreme end there are the strictest Vaisnavites who stress their purely devotional religion and who have adopted many food taboos. These will not eat certain types of

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter VI.



fish or meat. At the other extreme there are the Tantric Hindus who have no food restrictions whatsoever and who regard as essential in their religious practices elements which are disliked and even prohibited by many Vaisnavites. These two extremes have been given labels in popular speech. The Ahom who stress their purely vegetarian offerings and all that goes with it are sometimes called in Assamese *kesa*, or "uncooked" Ahom, whilst those at the other end of the spectrum are the *poka*, or "cooked" ones. Occasionally one Hindu Ahom may thus find it distasteful to be intimate with another. It may occur that some refuse to partake of a meal, or that a *kesa* Ahom may refer in a disparaging manner to a "disgusting" food habit of other Ahom people. The latter may, in response, refer to the "over-refinement" of some Ahom groups and consider it no wonder that the great and virile Ahom kingdom came to an end when there were segments of the populace running away with Indian ideas. However, this opposition may not be described as a rift in Ahom society, or as the basis for the development of sub-castes. It is little more than an opportunity for banter. In actuality there are many Vaisnavites who are willing to relax their food taboos. Moreover the number of divisions amongst Ahom Hindus is so great, religious as well as political, that they do not readily all fit into such broad categories as *kesa* and *poka*.

In this varied scene of Hinduized Ahom peoples it is very difficult to recognise aspects of their religious behaviour which are reminiscent of customs in Southeast Asia. The group which appears to have kept some traditions which may eventually be traced to the Ancient Tai are the Tantric Saivites. This may be seen in the beliefs surrounding a sacred pole in the house, or in the ritual manner of presenting a bowl of rice-wine. It is possible that some features of their sacrifices also hail from Southeast Asian customs. However, the aspects thus far recorded of these sacrifices are basically Hindu. These include the chanting of a devotional song by all chief participants at the moment the victim is killed, the method of suffocating the animals, and the ritual dances which accompany the sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst it is traditional to describe the history of Ahom religious thought in terms of one whereby Tai religion is replaced by Hinduism, it is also possible to present the same story from a typical Tai-Ahom perspective, putting in the foreground those Ahom who did not readily accept Hinduism, who retained their own religious specialists and rituals. From this rather unorthodox perspective it is seen that Hinduization was by no means immediately accepted. During the early centuries of their expansion in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Ahom court may have taken some interest in various strands of Hinduism, but the general populace appeared to have retained their old Ahom world-view and religion. The kingdom's expansion and the concomitant absorption of considerable numbers of non-Ahom peoples may have paved the way for the first large-scale conversion to Vaisnavism which accompanied the missionary activities of Sankardeva and his disciples. Even then, Ahom kings retained respect for their old Tai religion,

<sup>10</sup> A short description of the principles of Hindu sacrifices is found in J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, edited by H. K. Beauchamp. 3rd edition, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1968, pp. 510-3.



for it was not until the second half of the seventeenth century that an Ahom king formally embraced Vaisnavism and sponsored it in favour of Tai religion. The militant propagation of Hinduism which followed the king's conversion did not meet with unanimous approval, indeed, it created a considerable social unrest. It may safely be argued that the king's partisanship in religious matters contributed to the public revolt and revolution which soon sprang up. Some measure of stability was only reached under a king who was not wholly committed to the Hindu religion. Sue Pat Phaa, also known as Gadadhar Sinha (1681-1695), apparently was sympathetic towards those sections of the population who wished to uphold traditional Ahom religion. In the history of Ahom religious thought, this was probably the last strong stance taken by followers of Tai religion in face of an ever-encroaching Hinduism. From the beginning of the eighteenth century onward the number of people adhering to Ahom religion dwindled. Sue Pat Phaa's successors were inclined towards Sakta Hinduism and it became an accepted fact that the king and his court sponsored Hinduism. It has already been noted how much of the eighteenth century was dominated by the Moamaria movement, the leaders of which overthrew the government and managed to set up their own rule. The Ahom royal family eventually resorted to requesting the English to come to their aid.

Even during the tumultuous sectarian struggles of the eighteenth century, traditional Ahom religion had by no means disappeared. At the beginning of the nineteenth century a rough estimate is given for the number of Ahom who do not fall under a label Hindu. Hamilton considers this number of people who have "yet no other priests than the Deodhaings", to be one-fourth of the whole Ahom population.<sup>11</sup>

It is here not argued that traditional Ahom religion remained unchallenged, or that it remained aloof and unchanged in the face of the Hindu character of Assamese culture in general. There is no doubt as to the fact that traditional Ahom religion retreated and lost its hold over the Ahom state. However, a fact which is not usually mentioned in Ahom history books is that it retreated rather slowly and that non-Hindu Ahom religion managed to maintain a foothold in the more isolated villages. Until the present day some rituals are preformed which derive from the traditions the Ahom carried with themselves in the thirteenth century, and these feature large in the following sections of this chapter.

An important factor which has helped preserve Ahom religion was the fact that, from a very early date, probably as early as the twelfth century A.D. onwards, the Ahom priests have made use of written sources, passing on their knowledge on pieces of bark and later on home-made paper. There still exists a large number of ritual handbooks, some hundreds of years old, others more recently copied, attesting to the continuous interest in some aspects of ancient rituals and practices. Some deal with house-building, some contain various lengthy prayers, to be uttered during state ceremonies and yet others provide illustrations of auspicious and inauspicious signs with the help of which a priest can predict the future. Un-

<sup>11</sup> S. K. Bhuyan (editor), *An Account of Ahom priestly clans*, nowadays often *Assam*, p. 53. The Deodhaings referred to as Deodhais, to by Hamilton are one of the traditional

fortunately the bulk of this material remains unpublished and untranslated. The texts which have thus far been published usually deal with family genealogy and state history, known under the name of Buranjis. Such books have been of great importance since they have formed the foundation upon which all Ahom political history has been built. Yet, the Buranji genre is only a single branch of Ahom literature and there exists a wealth of untapped material primarily dealing with Ahom religion.

Recently the Publication Board in Assam has embarked upon a programme to remedy this situation. One old Ahom textbook, a treatise on elephant diseases, has thus far been published<sup>12</sup> and others are being prepared. The series may not yet succeed in making available the rich Ahom ritual tradition, for it comprises only court manuscripts which were lavishly illustrated by great artists of the time. The content has very little bearing upon every-day religious practices of the Ahom people, which are left in manuscripts which are not as spectacularly illustrated. Yet, even in the *Hastividyarnava*, which is primarily an Indian-inspired Moghul-illustrated document, a few snippets of information on animal sacrifices can be elicited, for amongst the many pieces of practical advice for treating specific illness there is often a curt reference to religious ritual. It is quite common to find the remark: "Sacrifice a black cock",<sup>13</sup> "Offer a pair of white ducks",<sup>14</sup> "Take a pair of black doves" or "Take a white goat".<sup>15</sup> Amongst the offerings to be made in order to cure elephant disorders are animals which must have been quite difficult to obtain, such as a cobra, a pair of brown swans, a pair of deer and a particular species of fish. In addition there are single references to the offering of rats, frogs and even earth worms. However, in most cases the person treating sick elephants must sacrifice animals which are relatively easily procured such as a boar, a pigeon and the domestic animals mentioned earlier in this paragraph. It should be understood that the *Hastividyarnava* may not be taken as representative of general medicinal practices; it constitutes an extremely specialised field of knowledge. Nevertheless, from it can be deduced that the idea of a sacrifice was acceptable as part of many a treatment. Also it reveals an interesting range of animals considered suitable for such a purpose. Moreover, it is worth noting that in many cases the colour of the animal to be sacrificed is prescribed.

Fortunately it is not necessary to rely solely upon the few published Ahom documents in order to establish an outline of many of the traditional Ahom sacrificial rituals. There are namely even today still a few pockets of Ahom culture where traditional religion has been, to some extent, preserved. This has been possible only because in the traditional Ahom priestly clans of the Deodhais, the Mohans and the Bailungs (in Ahom language these clans are known respectively as Mo Sai, Mo Sam and Mo Plong) the manuscripts have been preserved and perused and some of the rituals have been performed. Aspects of the ancient Ahom religion have therefore been kept alive as a family tradition in some of the most isolated Ahom villages.

<sup>12</sup> P. C. Chaudhury (editor), *Hastividyarnava*, Gauhati: Publication Board, Assam, 1976.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30, p. 52 and p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46 and p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Especially during the last two decades there has been a growing interest amongst some of the Ahom people, including Ahom who formally belong to those who profess one of the types of Hinduism described above, in the ancient Ahom religion. This is related to a large extent to a growing political awareness amongst certain educated Ahom. Some of these hanker after the days when the Ahom administration dominated Assamese political life. Others are attempting to stress their minority's individuality and uniqueness in the Assamese setting. Some of the Ahom organised a movement supporting specific pro-Ahom proposals and as a result a large document was prepared which was sent to India's Prime Minister. In this memorandum reference is made to the great days of the Ahom and the continuation of typically Ahom customs:<sup>16</sup>

These peoples still retain their original religious faiths, beliefs and customs. Almost all of them drink rice beer which is taboo in Hinduism. Their marriage customs differ. The Tai-Ahoms perform their marriages in Chaklang form. . . . Ancestor worship and worship of their family and caste deities are still continued.

It is quite clear that the hitherto almost forgotten Tai folk customs have gained a new status amongst some of the Ahom who are looking for a political identity.

The recent and sudden preoccupation with traditional Ahom religion generated a wish to catch non-Hindu Ahom religion under a widely-recognised and respectable label. Some Ahom noticed that there was a similarity between the Japanese samurai-oath and that uttered by an Ahom groom when he holds the sword *hengdaan* and they have felt that there is a possibility that ancient Tai and Japanese state religion are related. Others speculated on the possibility that ancient Tai religion was nothing else but Taoism. This speculation was based on the homophony of Tai and Tao. Others again, considered that the elaborate colourful display of lamps during the *cak lang* ritual might constitute a Buddhistic element. They proposed also that in some of the Ahom prayers there could be found a word which might refer to the Lord Buddha. The latter faction has been considered most feasible amongst the leading Ahom intelligentsia<sup>17</sup> and therefore it is nowadays customary to attach a Buddhistic label to the pre-Hindu Ahom religion. Thus a society has been formed which propagates traditional Ahom religion under the name of the Buddhist Society of Phralung Culture.

Personally, I do not accept any of the three hypotheses mentioned above. The similarity between a Tai oath and a Japanese one proves no more than that both cultures appear to have had a strong martial tradition. As for Taoism, there seems no connection between its basic beliefs and those of the Tai. The protagonists of the idea that the ancient Ahom religion was Buddhistic present a quasi-historical argument to back up their "theory". It is said by those who adhere to it that Ahom peoples must have lived for

<sup>16</sup> *Memorandum Demanding a Separate State or a Federating Unit Comprising the Two Upper Assam Districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur to the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, Govt. of India*, on behalf of the Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad, April, 1968, p. 42. Note the word

"Mongoliya" in the committee's name, which is a reflection of the supposedly Mongolian origin of the Tai which has been discussed at some length in Volume I.

<sup>17</sup> P. Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, p. 87.

centuries in Mon-dominated, Buddhist regions before they entered the Brahmaputra Valley, in order to have provided them with an opportunity to learn the art of writing and make this into an integral part of their culture. Whilst the intimate contact with Mon peoples took place, it is likely that they adopted also their religion, so the argument goes. Such an argumentation rests upon several doubtful assumptions. In the first place it is not at all certain that a very long and intimate cultural contact is needed for a martial people such as the Tai to adopt a script. Neither is it plausible that whilst adopting that skill they would have felt inclined to accept an alien religion. There is no trace of Buddhism in the early Buranjis, and the words such as "Phralung" which some would like to recognise as Buddhist, need not necessarily refer to a Buddhist concept. Altogether there is no proof of a supposed Buddhist penetration of the traditional Ahom religion. Colonel Gurdon, one of the few non-Ahom trained observers who personally witnessed Ahom ceremonies also reports that there is no trace of Buddhism in traditional Ahom religion.<sup>18</sup> All the available evidence points to the idea that this religion is to be regarded as a branch of the old Tai religion and that label should suffice to identify it.

Whatever the original Ahom religion may be called, there is no doubt that during the last decades there has been a growing interest in it, not only on the part of Assamese intellectuals, but also amongst the Ahom in general. There are several traditional Ahom temples and the three I visited in 1980 looked in very good repair. These temples are completely different from Hindu cult buildings and they are easily recognised through the fact that they are built in an octagonal shape.<sup>19</sup> The revival of the Ahom traditional religion has also been clearly noted by Indira Barua for the community of Moranjan in Sibsagar District. She reports that the Mohans and Deodhais have been attracted to Hinduism, but that at the same time they have not been willing to give up their old rituals and customs. She reports:<sup>20</sup>

During the last four or five years a process of reversal has been noticed inasmuch as the loosening holds of traditional practices are reappearing with renewed vigour. This is perhaps because of political consciousness during the more recent years.

In the following paragraphs some of the main Ahom sacrifices are described in the manner as they are performed at present. In the eyes of the

<sup>18</sup> P. R. T. Gurdon, "Ahoms", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (edited by J. Hastings), Volume I, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908, p. 236.

<sup>19</sup> Thus far nobody has traced the history of the eight-sided Ahom temple. On first sight it seems possible that the shape may have been given to all traditional Ahom gathering halls. If it is the case, it may throw new light upon the remarkable fact that Ahom coins are also eight-sided. The customary explanation for the eight-sided coins is that this related to an eight-sided conception of the whole kingdom. Gogoi feels that it may have been derived from the Hindu division of space in eight directions (*Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*,

p. 26). Until further evidence is brought forward an open mind must be kept on this issue. If full architectural details were available, the Ahom temple ought to be compared with other Tai meeting houses, such as the Tung-chia drum tower. See I. de Beauclair, "A Miao Tribe of Southeast Kweichow and its Cultural Configuration", *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica*, No. 10, 1960, pp. 173-5.

<sup>20</sup> I. Barua, *Social Relations in an Ahom Village*, New Delhi: Stirling Publications, 1978, pp. 103-4. See also her "The Ahom: An Appraisal of a Reviving and Revitalizing Trend", *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University*, Volume VI, 1977, p. 62.

Ahom ritual specialists these ceremonies represent a pure and ancient tradition, untarnished by Hinduism. From my own observation, however, it was soon apparent that Hinduism had deeply invaded many aspects of the rituals. Thus it is commonly accepted that the Ahom elders, who have gathered for a major communal traditional Ahom ritual, perform what is called in Assamese the *hari bol*, the Hindu invocation of the gods. Similarly, when the officiating priest intones the ancient Ahom words of prayer, his method of chanting is apparently inspired by that of the Vaisnavites. Considering the many centuries of relative isolation from other Tai groups, such Hindu influences are only to be expected. The following account of traditional Ahom sacrificial practices is thus not intended to depict Ancient Tai religion, neither is it a description of thirteenth-century customs. They are twentieth-century practices which, with some justification, present-day Ahom people believe to be a direct offshoot from the ancient Southeast Asian rituals.

### Methodology

Once the intricate religious scene and the different factions amongst the Ahom were understood, the methods of obtaining information regarding traditional sacrifices became apparent. The best information was likely to be found amongst those Ahom farmers where the old religion had been preserved to a large extent. In the few remaining pockets where this was the case it was found that animal sacrifices were still practised, both in the large-scale communal gatherings and in the domestic ceremonies.

Whilst the Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti interviews had presented considerable difficulties, partly because the sacrificial traditions had long since been abandoned and partly because people were loath to discuss them, Ahom interviews presented relatively small obstacles. Contacts were easily made and co-operation was spontaneous. In fact, some of the few difficulties which arose came about because the response was occasionally too enthusiastic. The list of persons reputed to possess ancient documents and unique knowledge about Ahom customs grew alarmingly. Many people were eager to introduce the researcher to a number of these specialists. However, when such introductions were followed up it became clear that, whilst these "specialists" were genuinely involved with a wish to acquire knowledge about the former Ahom culture, they knew actually very little. The scanty information they possessed passed rapidly around amongst these people during passionate discussions about the impact of Ahom civilization upon that of Assam. Apparently the researcher was passed around amongst members of the revivalist movement mentioned above. The knowledge which was obtained from these good-willing people was interesting and sometimes quite helpful, but it did not cover descriptions of traditional ceremonies.

In order to obtain such descriptions it was necessary to travel to those parts of Sibsagar and North Lakhimpur Districts where Ahom religion was still viable and to approach the officiating priests. The first meetings with these priests were usually somewhat frustrating. These visits had been heralded beforehand and as a result scores of interested people gathered to help. As a result such visits became marked by formal welcoming



speeches and answers thereon. Only a small amount of information which could be used for this volume was obtained in this manner. Nevertheless, on several of these occasions it was possible for the researcher to attend traditional Ahom rituals, some of them especially enacted for the researcher.

From the formal visits and the attendance at ceremonies it became clear that the sacrificial tradition was still alive. Also it proved impossible to wait for the public enactment because transport was difficult to arrange and the fieldwork time was limited to a mere three months. Therefore it was decided to discuss the main Ahom sacrifices in detail with those priests who had officiated at them on many occasions. In order to avoid attracting a crowd I travelled to such priests very early in the morning and arrive at their houses unannounced, in the hope that a private interview would be allowed. This was always granted and in the subsequent hours a considerable number of rituals would be discussed before the word had been passed around and curious by-standers would accumulate. The interview schedule was therefore arranged in such a manner that the most difficult questions were placed at the beginning and matters suitable for a more general discussion at the end. This method worked satisfactorily and the following paragraphs are largely the results of several of these interviews.

### Sacrificial rituals

#### a) *The communal ritual called uum phra*

Undoubtedly the most important communal Ahom sacrifice is the one known as *uum phra*, or, in the literature sometimes as *ompha*. During this ritual the chief powers of the Ahom pantheon are worshipped. This ritual was performed during the days of the Ahom kings and he was personally present. Gogoi mentions that it was held with "considerable grandeur and innumerable sacrifices".<sup>21</sup> Gurdon adds that it was held "for the good of the crops and the state"<sup>22</sup> in other words, it was a state ceremony believed to increase the chance on a good year. It used to take place once a year at Deoghar in Sibsagar District. Since the demise of the Ahom kingdom the ritual has fallen somewhat in abeyance. It no longer takes place at yearly intervals, but it is arranged once every seven, eight or more years. The last time it was performed was at the end of March 1974 near the site of the old Ahom royal "play house" in Sibsagar District. If the revivalist movement, which has been mentioned above, continues unabatedly it is likely that the ritual will be performed there again. However, since it is a ceremony which is rather difficult to organise and costly, it will probably not regain its former annual character.

In the days of the Ahom kingdom there were reputedly two optimum times each year for holding *uum phra*, and one of these would be chosen. The first one was at the traditional New Year festival which fell in mid-April, and the second one occurred in the Tai eighth month (i.e. June-July). At present, the day is decided by a committee of traditional Ahom leaders, who

<sup>21</sup> P. Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> P. R. T. Gurdon, "Ahoms", p. 236.



use old astrological handbooks to decide upon auspicious points of time. The manner in which the ritual is held nowadays, enables it to be performed in two days.

The first day is fully occupied with preparations. The sacrificial grounds are cleared and cleansed, cult buildings and altars are made from fresh jungle material, such as bamboo, twigs, creepers and leaves, and at some distance animal pens are erected. The sacrificial site is divided into three sections, one at the front, and two behind. The latter two are situated next to each other, one left, the other at the right. In each of the three sections specific types of ritual constructions are made. The tripartite organization corresponds to a general division of the Ahom pantheon into three types of supernatural beings. The front one stands for the great heavenly powers, left is reserved for gods and goddesses more closely connected with the earth, and the right section is meant for the powers which have their abode at the earth's boundaries, there where heaven and earth meet in the distance. In each of the sections there is a chief officiating priest who is responsible for the supervision of the construction of altars in his section.

The frontal part of the sacrificial ground, the one for the great heavenly gods, has in the centre a big shrine which is known as the *ho lung* in the Ahom language. It consists of a platform on four posts (Ahom: *saang*), and a roof construction. The latter will be wrapped in a white cloth. The four sides of the roof are kept in their place by a central bamboo pole of which the lower end has been split into four sections. The upper part of the pole juts up high in the air. At the top it may be decorated with a carved piece of the banana tree. On the *saang*, hidden from view by the wrapped white material, are three leaf-containers in which offerings can be placed; beneath the *saang*, this time in view, some further leaves indicate the place for other gifts. A ladder, carved out of the soft trunk of a banana tree or of wood, leads from the ground to the edge of the *saang*. Adjoining the *ho lung* on the right-hand side is a huge bamboo post, erected in such a manner that its tip leans towards the neighbouring *ho lung*. From the top of this bamboo mast two chains lead down, first reaching the *ho lung*, and then leading left and right, connecting all altars of this front section with one another. These chains are made of intertwined rings made out of bamboo thread. In Ahom the priest refers to them as *sai*.<sup>23</sup>

To the left of the *ho lung* a wooden pole is erected. It is a smooth piece of timber, approximately man-high, decorated at the top by a carving which makes the pole end in the shape of a banana flower. Approximately at waist height a loose bamboo ring is attached around this pole. Ahom priests call this post a *khot lak*, literally a "tying post". It is said that in the past this was used for tying an elephant (*phuk chaang*), and that nowadays, when the ritual takes place, still one can find a miniature elephant, carved from the root part of a banana tree, is attached with a string to the ring. To the left side of the *khot lak* two altars are built, one square and one rounded in shape. To the right of the *ho lung* and its mast a long rectangular altar is made and this altar is subdivided into sections with separate offering places next to each other. From left to right the altars and offering places

<sup>23</sup> *Ho lung* constructions are extremely parts of the Buranjis. G. C. Barua (editor), old, for they are mentioned in the earliest *Ahom Buranji*, pp. 20-21.

are respectively for the following deities:<sup>24</sup> Khao Kham (for him is the round altar), Lueng Din (the square altar next to the *khot lak*), Lueng Don (for him is the central *ho lung*), Chang Sai Hung (the left-side offering place on the long altar), Chit Lam Sang (under this name seven<sup>25</sup> related gods are covered and therefore room is made on the long altar for seven individual offerings), Mut Kum Tai Kum (place on the long altar) and finally Yaa Sing Phra (this goddess is honoured at the offering place at the right-hand side of the long altar).

At the "earth" section of the sacrificial grounds there are four chief altars, all easily recognisable by their remarkable shape. Each offering place is namely covered with a dome-shaped roof in which a half-moon-shaped opening has been left in the front through which offerings can be passed. From left to right (as seen from the officiating priest) the four altars are dedicated to the following deities: Phii Mae Thao, Nang Rai, Nang Khai and Aai Mae Nang. Further to the right there is a space kept free for offerings to minor powers belonging to the "earth" section, these gifts will be placed in a row on leaves on the ground.

The third and last section begins at its left-hand side with a dome-shaped altar of the type seen in the "earth" section. This is probably the altar for Lang Ku Ri. Then there is an offering place for Nang Si Sao, followed by a long altar with seven subdivisions for Lai Lung Kham, three sections for Pho Le Khaa and further subdivisions on a separate altar for Phii Ka Thial.<sup>26</sup> Just as with the "earth" section, a considerable space is kept open to the right of these main altars where on the ground offerings for minor powers can be placed. The names of these minor powers could not be recalled off-hand, other than that the name of the god whose gift comes at the last place is Chao Phok Chao Dam.

In the middle, between the left and right sections of the sacrificial grounds, yet another post is erected. This one is called the *lak* (post, or pillar) for Doi Malung Phu Ra, reputedly an important god standing for the power of nature. This pillar is fashioned of the stem of a banana tree in which five layers each of five bamboo candle holders have been stuck. It is at this pillar that later, at the beginning of the second day, all sacrificial animals are presented first. Doi Malung Phu Ra will receive personal offerings at the foot of his pillar and he will be able to inspect the varied gifts.

The types of animals required for *uum phra* sacrifices used to comprise elephants, horses, buffaloes, cows, various types of horned and hornless

<sup>24</sup> This list, like others below has been constructed from several interviews with one group of traditional Ahom people, of whom one has actually served as officiating priest in the front section of the *uum phra* ritual. It is not necessarily an exhaustive or even an authoritative list. From my observations it appears that priests have considerable freedom in assigning meanings to ritual aspects as well as in proclaiming for whom an altar has been built. It is thus possible that other priests would offer varying opinions, or that other versions will be recorded at some future date, hope-

fully by persons who have been able to attend this rare and important ritual. Since, however, there are no other detailed descriptions published and since the group of informants contained some very knowledgeable persons I have decided to present their views on the *uum phra* ceremony in some detail.

<sup>25</sup> The Ahom for "seven" is *chit*.

<sup>26</sup> The informants were not completely certain of the details in this section. The list here represents a statement in which different opinions have been reconciled.

deer, pigs, goats, dogs, ducks, fowls and pigeons. Nowadays elephants, horses, buffaloes and deer are too difficult to obtain and too costly, but most of the other animals listed above could find a place in a modern *uum phra*. With respect to specifically prescribed colours of sacrificial animals, very little information could be obtained. At one occasion a black cow was mentioned as an animal especially suited for *uum phra*, and on another it was said that in the past the dog to be sacrificed had to be of a white colour, but that at present it did not matter what colour dog was chosen.

From the above account it can be seen that the first day was filled with the building of many altars, with erecting temporary pens and with the preparation of the many other offerings. The priests and their helpers might spend the whole night getting everything ready for the second day. This preparation includes lengthy invocations to the deities. The second day is the day of the actual sacrifices. The activities are manifold and they consume so much time that there is no opportunity for the ritual leaders to relax until late in the evening when the crowds go home. One of the early important stages in the ceremony is the consecration of water. Priests will chant a powerful *mantra* in the Ahom language whilst holding a container with water and stirring the liquid with a sprig of a sacred plant, such as the *blok sing phra*. The sacrificial grounds, the altars, the heaps of offerings and also the sacrificial animals are all sprinkled with this water. The priests themselves may drink a small quantity and rub some over their heads. Another important stage is the presentation of animals to Doi Malung Phu Ra and their being led to the section where they will be slaughtered. A priest will begin at the left-hand side of his section and work to the right. The reason for this is that the priests view themselves as facing the world of the deities and the direction which is left to the priest must be right to the gods. This order can also be observed in other traditional Ahom ceremonies; altars and gifts are arranged from left to right, at least, when observed from the place of the officiating priest.

The front section, where the *ho lung* rises high in the air, is the first to begin with sacrificing. In this front section no blood is shed, the animals are killed by clubbing and by strangulation. In the other two sections the animals have their throats cut by the officiating priests themselves. The blood is collected in earthenware pots and taken to be boiled before it is presented at the appropriate altars. The livers are taken out of all the animals and kept separately to be prepared and offered. At each altar the priest and his helpers will chant lengthily in Tai, formally presenting an array of gifts. The nature and character of the gifts vary from altar to altar, depending upon the power being addressed. At the *ho lung*, for example, where gifts to Lueng Don are arranged, there are four separate offering places, three dishes behind the cloth and one dish on the ground beneath the *saang*. The ground dish is the proper place for offering money. Chief dignitaries put something of value there. It is quite likely that in the days of the Ahom kings considerable wealth found its way there, possibly as a formal gesture which also was intended to recompense the organisers for the costs incurred. Nowadays, however, relatively small gifts are placed there, together with whole, uncut areca nuts as a welcoming gesture. The three offering places behind the *ho lung*'s white cloth will each contain a pair of chickens, a duck's egg, a preparation from dried rice, a fermented rice

dish, a dish with salted rice, a container with rice-wine as well as segments of areca nut wrapped in betel leaf.

In the "earth" section of the sacrificial grounds, each of the four dome-shaped altars will have offerings of goats, ducks, chickens, pigeons, bananas and rice cakes as well as pieces of areca nut wrapped in betel leaves. An example of an offering in the third section is that which is customarily placed on its first altar. There a great number of dishes are presented, each dish having been prepared according to a special recipe. Ingredients are oil, salt, ginger, a variety of spices, rice cakes, bananas (of the type known as "*angulia*"), and several rice dishes, such as one prepared from pre-soaked fried rice. The remarkable feature of the gifts for this altar is that all vegetable dishes have to be only half-cooked. Yet another dish which is presented at this particular altar contains boiled blood, obtained from pigs, dogs and fowls.

Throughout the period of the second day when offerings are made to the gods, and the invoked powers may be presumed to be present, the priests' helpers keep incense sticks burning on all altars. Also they will light oil lamps near all the platters and keep these burning. At several intervals they will go the rounds with rice-wine and replenish the gods' containers. During the presentation of the offerings the priests and their helpers intone lengthy prayers in the Ahom language. This is the proper occasion during the *uum phra* ceremony for the beating of the large sacred *maduli* drum in rhythm with the chanting. The *maduli* has a drumming surface on both ends, but one of these surfaces is larger than the other. Reputedly this particular type of large drum was first introduced into the *uum phra* ceremony in the mid-eighteenth century during the Moamaria Vaisnavite rebellions which have been mentioned above. Under the influence of the ideas underlying the Moamaria movement a certain Borkhamlai Barua introduced new popular features into the *uum phra* ritual, such as music and dance and therefore a decision had to be made as to what musical instrument was suitable for such an important ritual. In a dream Borkhamlai Barua came to know that he ought to search at a particular place near the banks of the river Brahmaputra and that some suitable sacred objects would come floating down from Sadiya. He accordingly went to the appropriate spot and there he found the *maduli* drum, as well as two golden necklaces and a sacred book. Thus it is that the large *maduli* found its way from Sadiya to Sibsagar District. In the course of time the original wooden instrument fell into bad repair and eventually was discarded. Unfortunately the present *maduli* is only a copy of the original.

The *maduli*-accompanied chanting is at first intoned in the front section of the sacrificial grounds. When this music is played the time has arrived for some of the deities to manifest themselves. They do this by taking possession of certain men who have been carefully prepared for this honour. For each of the three sectors one man has been made ready. These men have lived in relative isolation, they have been dressed in special clothing which sets them apart from ordinary people and they have been fasting quite strictly for a duration of three days. At the first sign of one of the men becoming possessed a tray with offerings is placed in front of the pillar for Doi Malung Phu Ra. This suggests that the *luk* with the twenty-five oil lamps is connected with the aspect of spirit possession. When one of

the men has become possessed he speaks with a voice quite different from his own and he uses Ahom words. These men are not restrained in their actions by helpers; they are quite free to walk around, sit, dance or act in any manner the spirit orders. By-standers often ask them questions about the near future, or about the causes and remedies of certain sicknesses and the gods may reveal what lies in store. The fact that the gods speak in Ahom, a ritual language with which only a few priests are familiar, constitutes a considerable communication problem which is partly overcome by the use of many signs and gestures and by requesting people who know a few words of Ahom to help interpret.

Since the ritual presentation of offerings involves very lengthy chants in Ahom at each individual altar, the priests have to work hard in order to give their quatum of offerings. Small quantities of the foods will be consumed later in the day by the priests, the helpers and the throng of spectators, but the programme for the day is so overloaded that there is no time for a grand large-scale communal feast. In the past, when more time was available, undoubtedly such a feasting took place. Nowadays the great amounts of food which are left over when the ceremony comes to an end will be distributed amongst all and people can take their share home. There is no restriction regarding the attendance at this largest of all traditional Ahom rituals, men, women and children can take part at *uum phra*.

It has been customary amongst some Ahom priests and also amongst Assamese scholars to equate some of the Ahom gods and goddesses with Hindu deities. Thus it is often stated that Lueng Don is no-one else but Indra, and that Yaa Sing Phra must be the same as Sarasvati. There is one scholar who has attempted to scan the Ahom and Hindu pantheon and list all equivalents. He presents a list containing twenty-four correspondences.<sup>27</sup> At first sight such a large number of equivalents appears to point at strong Indian influences in the composition of the Ahom pantheon. However, a closer examination of the list soon reveals a different picture. The couples Lueng Don — Indra and Yaa Sing Phra — Sarasvati are the only two cases where a generic correspondence can be argued, Lueng Don having the attributes of a heavenly ruler, and Yaa Sing Phra being the goddess who guards the skills of verbal knowledge. Whether these correspondences can be maintained when the characters of Lueng Don and Yaa Sing Phra are examined in detail is a matter which future research may solve. A first reading of the relevant sections of the Ahom Buranjis suggests many un-Indra-like aspects in Lueng Don's genealogy and behaviour. Greater problems are posed by equations such as Lang Ku Ri with Siva and Pha Pin Bet with Visnu. There is ample evidence in the Buranjis that the characters of Lang Ku Ri and Pha Pin Bet cannot have been modelled upon these Indian gods. There are other entries in the list which give the Tai equivalents of Surya, Chandra and Agni, namely Ban, Duen and Fai. It ought to be noted, however, that these words do not denote Tai deities, they form simply a Tai translation of the Hindu concepts and mean nothing more or less than "day", "moon" and "fire". Another series of so-called Ahom equivalents are simply Ahom-pronounced repetitions of the Hindu name, such as Phyun for Varuna, Cha Kia for Sukra, and Tyani for Sani. None of these words occur in Ahom religious texts. Two entries are false translations

<sup>27</sup> P. Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, pp. 5-8.



of Indian concepts. The first is the equation of Mangala with the Ahom word for "power", and the second concerns the translation of the Indian Naga with an Ahom word "*ngek*". The Ngek is an animal from Tai mythology which lives in marshes and ponds, and it is unrelated to the Naga. Incidentally, Gogoi missed here an opportunity to present at least one convincing correspondence, for the Ahom appear to have a traditional Naga spirit, which they recognise by the name of Laakaa. The proposed list of correspondences can be further criticised, but the examples already given should suffice to demonstrate its main weaknesses. Especially when it is realised that the great majority of the major Ahom powers, which were encountered in the description of altars made during *uum phra*, do not even occur in the Gogoi list, the whole exercise serves to prove the opposite of what it intended to demonstrate, namely that the Ahom pantheon and that of the Hindus must be seen as basically unrelated systems of ordering the unseen powers.

During *uum phra* a great number of chief Ahom gods and goddesses are worshipped, indeed, it has been argued that the ritual provides an overview of at least the major divisions in the pantheon. Since so many powers are propitiated in *uum phra* it is natural that one or more of them are singled out in other Ahom sacrificial rites. By discussing a few of the smaller-scale offers the attributes of some of the gods and goddesses become somewhat clearer.

#### b) *Sacrifices for Phii Mae Thao*

Whilst *uum phra* is held for the benefit of the whole Ahom community, there are also several types of sacrifices held for the welfare of a household. One of these is the ritual to placate Phii Mae Thao. Literally the name Phii Mae Thao means "old mother spirit"; her name has been mentioned in the "earth" section of *uum phra*. Whether or not it is Phii Mae Thao who needs a special sacrifice is discovered by magical means. Usually there have been a few signs, through misfortunes, that some god or goddess may be punishing a particular household. A ritual specialist is called in and with divination it may be established that Phii Mae Thao is the offended party.

The offering ought to take place at the home. A sacrifice for Phii Mae Thao can be held any time of the year, and it is usually performed in the evening time. The best animals to offer to her are a white goat, a white duck and a white cock. Other gifts include a platter, respectfully offered on a stand, on which is placed an array of objects intended to please a female. These include bangles, beads, earrings, money and beautiful pieces of cloth as well as a well-shaped traditional lime container and a small knife for cutting areca nuts. There is considerable attention given to a proper and pleasing display of these goods, because Phii Mae Thao is a most important and powerful goddess.

Reputedly, it was to Phii Mae Thao that human sacrifices once were offered regularly. This may have occurred once a year during the reign of the Ahom king Siva Sinha (Sue Ton Phaa, 1718-1744). According to oral history at that time there was one clan, named the Sarordeka, which every year provided a young man to be offered during the official state ceremony. Such a man ought to be in good health and without any scar or deformation



which might displease the goddess and defeat the purpose of the ceremony. The victim, it is told, would begin walking of his own accord in the direction of the sacrificial temple near Sadiya in upper Assam. Some days before the state ritual was scheduled to be held, he would present himself to the head priest and tell him that he had come to be given to the goddess. In this version at least, it would appear that the goddess herself had chosen her own victim, and that neither the king nor the priests ought to be held responsible for these human sacrifices.

It is quite likely that the basic facts were true, and that actually the Ahom kings ordered the regular sacrifices to be held. As far as can be ascertained, originally there was in the neighbourhood of Sadiya an old Chutiya temple which was devoted to one of the Chutiya principal deities, Pisha-si, who was worshipped under the name of Tameshwari at the famous "copper temple". The latter derived its name from the fact that its roof was covered with copper plates. Pisha-si was also known and worshipped in another temple not far away under the Assamese name of Kesakhati, or "raw flesh eater". Human sacrifices were offered to her paradoxically not at the shrine for Kesakhati, but at the "copper temple". Endle provides details which correspond in broad lines with the oral history recounted above:<sup>28</sup>

Here from a period unknown down to a comparatively recent date human sacrifices were offered year by year. It is said that latterly the Ahom kings gave up for this purpose malefactors who had been sentenced to capital punishment; but as suitable victims of this type were not always forthcoming, a certain special tribe (khel) of the king's subjects were held bound to provide one and in return the members of this tribe were entitled to certain privileges, e.g., exemption from payment of ferry dues and market tolls, etc. It was necessary in all cases that the victims should be of high caste and "without blemish", the slightest mutilation, even the boring of an ear, rendering them unfit to be offered.

The stipulation that the victim ought to be free of the slightest mutilation raises the practical question of how a spate of scar-resulting "accidents" with knives, sticks and other objects could be prevented from occurring. Naturally there is little chance that it will ever be found out how it was done. The situation is comparable to that of soldiers being sent out on missions which will almost certainly prove lethal. An act of self-mutilation is equal to a reprieve. Yet relatively few seem to have resorted to such "base" tactics hoping that luck would smile even during extremely dangerous situations. Probably such circumstances prove that social approval and disapproval constitute stronger motivating forces than is generally thought.

Endle relates how the victim was detained for some time at the temple and sumptuously fed. On the day of his immolation he was dressed in magnificent clothes and led via a private path, trodden only by priests and their victims, to the edge of a deep pit where his clothes were taken from him and his head was chopped off. The body was thrown in the pit and the head was added to the heap of skulls before the shrine of the goddess. The estimate of the date when this custom was abandoned varies amongst researchers, one stating that it continued until the Burmese invasions, but another thinking that it was abolished by King Gaurinath in the late eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the exact date of the abolition of the practice, it is

<sup>28</sup> S. Endle, *The Kacharis*, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

a single family group. The village *subachani* is performed at an open place outside the built-up area. Goats, ducks, cocks, hens and pigeons are appropriate sacrificial animals. A family *subachani* has been witnessed by Indira Barua. She reports that it takes place in the grounds of the family courtyard:<sup>32</sup>

In this ceremony one fowl, two ducks, one pigeon and one goat are needed for sacrifice. After the puja, the members of the family bow down and seek blessings from the goddess. Both the Tai as well as the Assamese is used for performing the ceremony....

...This is a very elaborate ceremony and usually all the members of the hamlet who are also kinmembers are invited. Besides the kinmembers they invite their friends from various places.

d) *Yaa Sing Phra, Lueng Don and fowls' bone oracles*

In the mythological period of the Buranjis, when the ancestors of the Ahom are sent to earth in order to restore order and govern a tract of land, Lueng Don instructs them to take three important things, namely the sword *hengdaan*, drums with which to summon the heavenly gods' attention, and a couple of fowls, called *kai sing*. The sword *hengdaan* is, as we have noticed, still used, at least symbolically, during the marriage ceremony. The original copy, reputedly was an indispensable object during the coronation ceremony. On the use of drums, it appears that the earliest Ahom may have used them to ask for rain, and also during war raids.<sup>33</sup> As to the third gift, Barua translates the concept *kai sing* as "holy fowls". It is unclear why he chose to translate *sing* as "holy". It is more likely that *sing* refers to a general Tai concept "to cast auguries", which is rendered in Siamese as *siang*.<sup>34</sup> This would suggest that *kai sing* were "augury chickens", or "divination fowls". This translation is confirmed in a description of the use of the *kai sing*. After having made a *ho lung*:

...they took out the thigh bones of the holy fowls and cleared them with a knife. They made the bones polished... Then prepared the bones properly and began to calculate future events by examining them.<sup>35</sup>

The casting of auguries with the aid of chicken's thigh bones has been part of the Ahom tradition throughout the ages. This is testified, not only by the reference in the earliest parts of the Buranjis, but also by the existence of a large number of handbooks, the oldest of them hundreds of years old and written on *sanchi* bark, which were made solely to assist in the performance of the ceremony alluded to in the section of the Buranjis mentioned above. These handbooks contain a large number of diagrams showing two pairs of fowl's thigh bones in which thin sticks have been inserted. The only difference between one diagram and another lies in the position of the sticks, which apparently have been inserted in the holes through which veins used to enter the bone, technically known as *foramind nutritia*.<sup>36</sup>

Around the beginning of this century Colonel Gurdon witnessed the ceremony and has provided some fascinating details. A Deodhai priest arranged an altar of bamboo and banana tree stems. On top of this altar

<sup>32</sup> I. Barua, *Social Relations in an Ahom Village*, p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> G. C. Barua (translator and editor), *Ahom Buranji*, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> G. B. McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, pp. 887-88.

<sup>35</sup> G. C. Barua (translator and editor), *Ahom Buranji*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> For an example, see Padmeswar Gogoi, "Divination by Ahom Deodhais", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XLIII, Pt. 1, August 1955, pp. 49-52.

the following offerings were placed on banana leaves: fruit, rice, sugar cane, rice-wine and a lamp, as well as three fowls and three chicken eggs. The priest sprinkled consecrated water on the spectators with a sprig of the *blok sing phra* (the King flower), prayers were then offered to Yaa Sing Phra and the fowls' necks were wrung. The flesh was scraped off the fowls' legs until they were quite clean and then followed a search for any small holes that existed in the bones. As soon as any holes were located, small splinters of bamboo were inserted in them. Then the bones were held up in the air, with the bamboo splinters still sticking in them, and closely compared with diagrams in a holy book.<sup>37</sup>

For the student of ritual it is fascinating to know that the examination of chickens' thigh bones still takes place in the villages where traditional Ahom religion is practised. As yet, this researcher has not had the fortune to witness it personally, but he has been able to discuss the details with an Ahom priest who has repeatedly performed this ceremony. His description varies in some respects from that of Gurdon and therefore some of the details must be given here.

At first an altar is erected for the god Lueng Don. It is made attractive with offerings such as bananas, sugar cane, sweet dishes such as those called *akhoi* and *mithoi*, a lamp, rice and eggs. The priest makes his preliminary invocations in front of this altar. When these have been concluded he sits down near the altar and stretches his legs, spread apart, so as to make a bit of space immediately in front of the altar. In this space the fowls are placed. These are a hen and a cock, selected carefully so as to be certain that they were born in the same month. Then the priest, holding the fowls in the middle of the provided space, recites an ancient and powerful spell. This spell can be found on a small bark booklet which has been passed on over many generations, and it reputedly is so strong that it can kill animals. The fowls, upon hearing the recitation, will become like petrified beasts. If the priest were to lift his hands they would be unable to move away. By the time the whole formula has been chanted, the two birds drop dead of their own accord. They are plucked, prepared for the pot and boiled. Having given them sufficient time to cook, the legs are taken and scraped clean. The two sets of thigh bones are examined and the position of holes noticed. Specially prepared bamboo slivers are inserted in these holes. This is a delicate operation, care must be given to find the direction of the hole without forcing. Several pieces of bamboo are usually thus inserted and they are then reassembled to form a right-hand pair and a left-hand pair. These pairs of thigh bones with their bamboo sticks form a diagram which must be compared with pictures from an old handbook, and decisions must be made which of the pictures are most similar to the actual diagrams. Each picture carries a short description relating to its relative auspiciousness or inauspiciousness. The priest uses one pair of fowl's thigh bones to obtain clues regarding the background of the problem which gave rise to the request to cast the augury. The other pair gives hints on what is likely to happen in the future.

This account adds somewhat to Gurdon's, in that it provides details he left out. It also differs in some respects from that given by Gurdon.

<sup>37</sup> P. R. T. Gurdon, "Ahoms", p. 236.

Thus, when Gurdon witnessed the event three fowls were used, the method of killing was completely different and the spirit to whom the altar was dedicated was not the same. These variations are partly the result of the considerable freedom traditional Ahom priests have to interpret and elaborate upon their ceremonies, being restricted only by traditional expectations and written sources. Thus it is probable that the number of fowls killed depends on how many diagrams a priest needs in order to satisfy himself regarding the future and to be able to predict the best course of action. With respect to the difference in the methods of killing, the one described by Gurdon, simple and straightforward, appears more authentic, whilst the above-mentioned killing-spell has the flavour of an individual technique, possibly developed as a result of Hindu influences. The question as to whether Yaa Sing Phra or Lueng Don is the power to be addressed is probably not significant. A reading of Ahom mythology suggests that both are appropriate, Lueng Don in his capacity of the power who has instituted the custom of this method of divination, and Yaa Sing Phra being the goddess who passed on the knowledge and detailed instructions.<sup>28</sup>

With respect to the remaining details, the two accounts demonstrate that the basic technique has not changed. This method of casting auguries with the aid of fowl's thigh bones constitutes the most formal and solemn way of predicting the future amongst the Ahom. It was, for example, the appropriate ritual to be performed when the king wished to find out whether it was wise to attack a certain enemy, and if so, when, and in what manner this should be done. The ritual can also be held in order to obtain advice regarding private matters. Since this involves the invitation of a priest who must be found willing to perform the difficult ritual and following interpretation, it is usually reserved for occasions where advice is needed in truly baffling dilemmas.

Fowl's legs are not the only parts of the animal which are examined when a ritual specialist wishes to know the future. It is common practice to check a fowl's tongue bone and interpret its position. Furthermore, the skulls can be easily split into two halves, each of them shaped not unlike a kauri shell. Two persons may toss these halves up in the air and watch whether they come to rest with the outer side uppermost or fall in such a way as to expose the inner part. This game may be played between bride and groom in a friendly manner in order to find out which of the two will be more lucky. The person who first manages to toss the skull half so that the outside is up, is regarded as the winner.

#### e) *A sacrifice for Lai Lung Kham*

In the third, or "boundary" section, seven offering places are reserved for a deity called Lai Lung Kham. In the traditional Ahom pantheon Lai Lung Kham appears to be connected with illness, both with cattle disease and human illness, especially that of contagious character. The present-day Ahom villagers who are still practising traditional Ahom ceremonies recommend the buying of modern medicines, but hold that these will not be fully effective unless the purchaser worships Lai Lung Kham.

<sup>28</sup> G. C. Barua (translator and editor), *Ahom Buranji*, p. 19.

It is thought that during the days of the Ahom kings there used to be held a regular state-sponsored sacrifice to Lai Lung Kham for the welfare of the country. At that ceremony, reputedly a red dog was killed and offered to Lai Lung Kham. After this ceremony had taken place, the priest and his helpers would travel to the very edge of the kingdom, a place west of Gauhati, just downstream from Nalbari, called Dewadar, where the Koch kingdom began. Having arrived at the border they would ritually close a slipgate in a gesture of sealing the country up and preventing the entry of evils such as epidemics.

#### f) *Sacrifices for the ancestors*

Apart from blood sacrifices which were often held during elaborate funerals and which have already been described in some detail in Volume I of this series, there are also amongst the Ahom regular sacrifices performed at home, which are said to be for the general benefit of the deceased members of the family. This is known in Assamese as *damak diya*, and in Ahom it is referred to as *dam phii*. Every year there are two months which are considered to be especially suitable for such rituals. The first is the sixth Ahom month, known in Assamese as Baisakh, during which the traditional New Year feast is held. It corresponds with April-May in the international calendar. The second month during which the ancestors need to be remembered is during the twelfth Ahom month, known in Assamese as Katik which falls in October-November. The ceremonies on these two points of time are not identical. In April the offerings must be purely vegetarian and include a good selection of food items. There ought to be also some rice cakes and rice-wine as well as a piece of areca nut and betel leaves. Often there will be as many oil lamps and individual trays prepared as there are individual ancestors whom one wishes to honour. On the second occasion, later in the year, a chicken will be sacrificed. *Dam phii* is typically a family ritual; the head of each family presides over his own ceremony and no outsiders will be invited. It takes place in the kitchen, the most sacred place in traditional Ahom houses. In this kitchen can be found an upright pole which forms part of the house construction, called *sao tung dam*. This pole represents the ancestors. Indira Barua gives a summary description of the ritual. First altars to the gods are constructed and areca, betel leaves, rice-wine and fruit are offered. Then two further altars are set up for the ascending generations: of which one is for the immediate ascending generation (*ghaidam*) and the other for the rest of the ancestors (*siying*). They offer boiled fruits, rice-beer, etc. The head of the family offers oblations to the ancestors. The members of the family have to bow down and seek blessings for the welfare of the whole family.<sup>39</sup>

The ceremony is held in the evening, and if there has been a chicken sacrifice the family will share the meat amongst themselves.

The timing of the two ceremonies suggests that the formal remembrance of the ancestors is connected with the celebration of New Year. In April this ritual is timed so as to be in line with the New Year of the Indian calendar, and in October-November this may well represent a survival of the Tai calendar, for there can be little doubt that between the twelfth and

<sup>39</sup> I. Barua, *Social Relations in an Ahom Village*, pp. 92-93.



first Tai month lies the old Tai New Year. This matter is dealt with in some detail in the second part of this volume.

There exists amongst the Ahom also an extremely elaborate version of a *dam phii*, which once was a fully-fledged state ritual commemorating the ancestors of the ruling families. This large-scale ritual has survived to our days, albeit in a watered-down form. It is usually known as *me dam me phii*, a name in which the words *dam* and *phii* apparently refer to the ritual to remember the ancestors. It is not clear what the word *me* means in this name. One informant suggested that it originally could have been a ritual called *mueang dam mueang phii*, or "the country of the ancestors, the abode of the spirits", and that the word *mueang* had, in common parlance been shortened to *me*. This, however, represents but an informer's "hunch", and until some written evidence of a former spelling is found, the spelling *me dam me phii* ought to be maintained.

At the time of the Ahom kings the *me dam me phii* celebration was attended by the king and his senior ministers as well as a large number of followers. It took place at the great cemetery for kings and nobles at Charaideo and the preparations would last several days. There were many sacrifices during the ceremony, reputedly including elephants, horses buffaloes, cows, various types of deer, pigs, cocks, and hens. These animals were offered together with a large array of fruits and sweetmeats.

*Me dam me phii* still occurs every year at Charaideo. The proper time for it is in late February or beginning March, during the Assamese month of Phagun. However, it differs considerably from the state ceremony it must once have been. In the first place it has been much abbreviated. Whilst originally it lasted several days, nowadays the whole ritual is over in a few hours. At present all animal sacrifices have been culled, probably in an effort to prevent offending some of the stricter Vaisnavites who may be expected in the audience. The main purpose of the organisers appears no longer to be a feeding and strengthening of the forefathers of the king and the ruling families, but rather, under the pretext of a commemoration of the former rulers, a celebratory meeting for the most fervent members of what has been called the Ahom revivalist movement. Political considerations seem now to outweigh religious ones, and the student of traditional Ahom customs will need to consider these exiguous contemporary circumstances. Secondly, the performance of *me dam me phii* nowadays shows considerable Hindu influence. This is apparent in the inclusion of the Hindu ritual of invoking the gods, in the manner of recitation of the mantras and, at least in the 1980 performance of the ceremony, in the inclusion of milk in the food offerings.

Nevertheless, a thin substratum of traditional Ahom aspects can be recognised. For example, at the left-hand side of the offering grounds there was erected a *ho lung*: an altar on four posts, connected with the ground by a miniature ladder, roofed over with the aid of a bamboo pole split into four which was wrapped with a white cloth. The bamboo post rose high up in the air and was decorated at the top with a piece of banana tree trunk shaped to look like a banana flower. Behind the white cloth a variety of foods were placed, together with a large container with rice-wine. To the right of the *ho lung*, as judged from the priest's position, a long row of forty-two formal dishes stretches out, and during the ceremonies some



offerings are placed in each of them. These dishes are intended for each of the forty-two rulers who have governed the Ahom people in Assam, from king Sue Ka Phaa onwards.

Of special interest is the fact that, at some distance from the long row of dishes, several yards in the priest's direction, in the middle of the circle of elders, a pillar is erected. This pillar, just like the one set up for Doi Malung Phu Ra, which was encountered during *uum phra*, is shaped out of the trunk of a banana tree and it is provided with a large number of lamp-holders, the largest on top. This particular pillar is not devoted specifically to a power, but is considered to be a ritual object which is set alight when contact is being made with the unseen powers from above. The pillar's main function appears to be as lamp-holder. The similar object at *uum phra*, which appeared to be in the centre of interest when the first men become possessed, had a total of twenty-five lamps. The *me dam me phii* pillar observed in 1980 had only eleven lights, spread over four layers. The priest remarked that larger pillars could also be used and described one holding thirty-five lamps. The lamp holder is also found at the centre of every Ahom eight-sided temple. There it is called *kui leng lak* and of greater size than the temporary ones at *uum phra* and *me dam me phii*. In the temple, the *kui leng lak* displays ten layers of light-holders each layer having ten lamps. Together with the central top lamp this makes for a total of a hundred-and-one. In volume I this number has been encountered several times, and there is little doubt that in Ancient Tai religion this number stood for "a large number". Another aspect of *me dam me phii*, which it has in common with most traditional Ahom rituals, is that the officiating priest will sacralise a bowl of water by saying a lengthy prayer in Ahom language and that this water is sprinkled over the grounds as well as over the throng of devotees and spectators.

#### g) Other Ahom sacrifices

Blood sacrifices form part of many other Ahom rituals. For example, chickens may be killed during an elaborate version of the ancient *rik khwan* ritual. The *rik khwan* ceremonies have been extensively described in Volume I and it is not necessary to repeat them here. Other sacrifices may accompany a curing ritual, such as that which is held for a sick buffalo, and which Ahom farmers know as the ritual for Mo Jokh. During this ceremony a miniature buffalo is carved from the root part of a banana tree and a miniature male figure is placed on its back. That male represents Mo Jokh. He is dressed with a small piece of black cloth and provided with a miniature black turban. The priest brings this small buffalo and its black rider to the sick buffalo and then he invites Mo Jokh to come (presumably Mo Jokh stands for the sickness which is "exorcised"). He then takes the carved scene to the forest. There a black duck and a black cock are killed and placed on a small altar, together with green unripe bananas and some sweets made from rice powder. The buffalo and his rider are at first so placed that they face east. A further fowl is killed for the spirit's helper (in Assamese known as the *tekhela*). The animals' blood is collected in a container and this is offered on the altar, together with the birds' heads. Some feathers may be stuck in the altar. After the formal presentation of

the gifts the image is turned so that it now faces west. The meat of the birds can be taken home and eaten by the family.<sup>40</sup>

Apart from curative sacrifices, of which an example has been given, there are also a wealth of other rituals which often are accompanied by a small sacrifice. These are the agricultural rituals of the Ahom. However, since the material obtained from the Khamyang, Phahey and Khamti centred upon the large communal sacrifices and sacrifices held in case of epidemics, a description of agricultural sacrifices would lead to a complex field which can better be dealt with separately.

#### General remarks

It has become clear that blood sacrifices form an essential aspect of traditional Ahom religion. At this point it ought to be noted that there are also traditional ceremonies where, at least in the form they are presented at the present moment, no animals are killed. For example, the *phra lung* ritual, which takes place at the eight-sided temple, is free from bloodshed, and the yearly ceremony to honour Yaa Sing Phra also proceeds without sacrifices. In addition there are functions related to the annual rice-growing cycle, such as *khao wan mo*, which take place without blood sacrifice. These traditional rituals which are not accompanied by slaughter are, however, in the minority. Moreover, sometimes there are signs, such as when there is meat included amongst the prescribed offerings, that in the past they may have been accompanied by blood sacrifices.

In this chapter, most attention has been given to the large communal *uum phra* ritual. This ceremony has proved to be remarkable especially in that it was held on such a large scale. An array of deities is propitiated there and the idea may safely be held that none of the chief powers were left out. Therefore, the overall division of the offering place into three sections takes on a special meaning. It seems that the Ahom pantheon itself could be depicted in three groups: a group of heavenly powers, who are given the place of honour and precedence; a group of earthly deities, chief of which are four goddesses; and a group of "boundary" powers, living usually in the regions along the horizon. The ritual paraphernalia, encountered in *uum phra* and other Ahom rituals described, also need to be observed carefully. The most important sacred shrine is the *ho lung*, which consists of a platform with miniature ladder and a pointed "roof" of white cloth, the central bamboo jutting up high into the sky. The most common altars consist of square or rectangular platforms raised knee-high above the ground on small stilts. The "earth" deities in the *uum phra* ritual are given a different altar; these offering places with their dome-shaped roof may symbolise caves.

A series of remarkable objects of great importance were the ritual pillars. During *uum phra* there are two, and they seem to represent quite distinct symbols. The front one is a simple, almost unadorned piece of plant material which has a bamboo ring, and to which a miniature elephant may be fastened. The other one has been provided with a considerable number of lamp holders which jut out like the pins in a pin-cushion. The

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94. Barua describes a variant to Mo Jokh, whereby only one black duck was presented

second pillar of the *uum phra* ritual is devoted to a god of nature, all the sacrificial animals are presented there and at the time when the *maduli* is sounded an offering is placed at its foot. Basically this second pillar seems to be the same as the lamp pillar used during *me dam me phii* and the large lamp holder in the central point of the traditional Ahom temple. A ritual object which proved puzzling was the bamboo chain which connects all the altars in the front section of the *uum phra* grounds. None of the informants could think of a reason, other than that it had always been used, for the inclusion of that chain. The fact that these chains are raised high up above the central altar suggests that they may represent a symbolic connection between heaven and altars.

From the detailed description of some of these Ahom ceremonies it has also become quite clear that these rituals, which are taken by the Ahom people to be fairly "pure" Ahom, are replete with Hindu influences. Many instances have been mentioned, where such influences are quite clear. It has been shown that in one instance, namely in the custom of equating Ahom gods with gods of the Hindu pantheon, the influence appears quite superficial and for the analysis, it can easily be "peeled off". In other instances it will prove much more difficult to sift out Assamese and Ahom ingredients. When it is noted, for example, that the presentation of gifts to the ancestors takes place in the kitchen, the most sacred place of the traditional Ahom house, this feature seems to have come from Hinduism. However, the fact that one of the upright posts in this kitchen is dedicated to the ancestors and known as *sao tung dam*, has strong Tai overtones. Sometimes, therefore, Hindu and Tai beliefs have blended. Occasionally it may be very difficult to decide whether a ritual detail belongs to the Hindu, the Tai, or some other tradition. In the Ahom ceremonies it can, for example, be noticed that people make use of fresh leaves from the jungle, as well as the succulent green sheaths from the trunk of the banana tree in order to fashion ritual containers. It is felt that recently cut plant material is clean and pleasing to the gods. This attitude the Ahom share with many surrounding peoples and the only method of finding out whether certain features of this belief go back to the typically Tai tradition lies in the examination of details, first for the whole range of Tai peoples, and then amongst their neighbours.

## SACRIFICIAL TRADITIONS AMONGST OTHER TAI GROUPS

### The Shan

There are relatively few ethnographic accounts dealing with the Shan of Burma and most of those consulted did not mention blood sacrifices. Seidenfaden provides a few remarks, scattered through his book. He refers to three types of occasions during which sacrifices used to take place. The first one is the funeral of a Shan prince, which used to be accompanied by human and animal sacrifices. Reputedly these customs lasted well into the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> His second reference to Shan sacrifices deals with the foundation of palaces, bridges and city gates. In pre-British times it was the custom to bury a man or a woman alive under these foundations.<sup>2</sup> Finally he relates how it was believed in Chieng Tung that a terrible spirit inhabited a lake near the capital and how it was the practice, at least up to the British occupation, to appease this spirit by violating, debauching and abandoning to the wild animals four virgins.<sup>3</sup>

The first reference deals with funeral customs. The report fits in with what has been noted in Volume I of this study and needs no further comment, other than that Seidenfaden does not tell us from where he obtained his information.<sup>4</sup> The second example, which mentions human sacrifices under foundations, is most interesting in a wider perspective, for, as we will see later in this book, there are trustworthy accounts of very similar practices for various regions in Thailand. Seidenfaden's last account of human sacrifice is the most difficult to assess. Not only are all references missing so that it is impossible to find out upon what type of information the report is based, but also the detailed descriptions of the ritual, which would make it valuable for this analysis are lacking. Until the present day I have not come across other accounts of violation and immolation of virgins for religious purposes amongst the Tai.

Yearly Shan communal festivals include one to the spirit of the market place. If the people omit to present this spirit with such an offering it is believed that destructive epidemics or famine may result. Reputedly, every leap year special gifts are offered, when small huts are built in the grounds of the chief's court house and meat is cooked and offered to the spirits, who are requested to look after the town's welfare.<sup>5</sup> Again, this account is devoid of the ritual details necessary for a comparative survey. Somewhat more helpful is the mention of a Shan communal ritual for a shrine of the "heart" of the *mueang*. This guardian spirit of the *mueang* apparently has a brick altar which is situated at a huge tree. On the first day of the festival in honour

<sup>1</sup> E. Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples*, Seidenfaden's customary attention to Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1958, p. 42. scholarly detail.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> The book was arranged, posthumously, from rather rough notes and does not reflect

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Telford, "Animism in Kengtung State", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Volume XXVII, Part 2, August 1937, p. 135.

of this spirit a tray is prepared, on which there are clay images of domestic animals, cloth, tea, tobacco and various foods. This tray is presented at the altar and then taken outside the town where it will be abandoned. In this manner the evil spirits which may harm the inhabitants are attracted and led away.<sup>6</sup> This stage of the described ritual appears to be an elaborate version of the typical Tai exorcism which has been described in Volume I as *chu malaung* for the Tai of Assam, as *sia kabaan* for the Siamese, and also for the Black Tai. The *batawi puja* ritual described for the Ahom in the previous chapter may constitute another variant upon this theme. To continue the ritual for the guardian spirit of the *mueang*, on the second day all heads of households assemble at the big tree and offer rice at the shrine.<sup>7</sup>

### The Lue

Also for the Lue there is mention of sacrificial ritual connected with funeral customs, and there is no need to repeat the details.<sup>8</sup> Apart from this, there exist several eye-witness accounts of a sacrificial ritual for the spirit which, also amongst the Lue, is known as *Phii Mueang*. At the end of May 1937 such a ritual was attended by Izikowitz, a trained observer with an eye for details which prove relevant for this study.<sup>9</sup> All the villagers contribute to purchase a buffalo, and the adult men lead this animal to a permanent altar just outside the village. Women are not found in this procession, for they are excluded from the whole ritual. The buffalo is tethered to a stout pole which stands in the ground in front of the altar. The latter consists of a platform, some six or seven feet long, above which a shelter has been made. This altar, covered with white cloth, is divided into three parts, each part being looked after by its own priest. The most important of the three powers propitiated is *Phii Mueang*, the spirit of the region. The other two are guardian spirits of nearby salt mines. The priests kneel down and pray to gain the attention of these guardian spirits. Before each prayer is intoned a gong is sounded. A member of the Lamet ethnic minority, who is hired for the purpose, then comes forward. He dances three times around the animal and then kills it with his lance. He tries to ensure that the animal dies with the head to the north, for if the buffalo is not lying in a northern direction, this is interpreted as a sign that the coming harvest will be poor. The hiring of a Lamet for this task reflects the influence of Buddhism, none of the Lue wishing to perform such an act.

The buffalo blood having been collected in bowls, the animal is divided up into twelve parts. The severed head is hung from the tethering pole, the animal's nose pointing to the north. The meat is cooked and various dishes are prepared. On each of the three offering places on the altar bowls of food are set down. The priests pour rice-wine over each bowl and then formally invite the powers to partake of the meal. They said:<sup>10</sup>

"On this occasion we invite Tiao Fa Luong (in our transcription this is probably *Chao Faa Luang*), the Great Spirit of the Heavens, who is

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167. The appearance of clay images of domestic animals may represent a substitute of real animal sacrifices, presumably under Buddhist influence.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>8</sup> F. M. Lebar (et al.), *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 213, citing

Chiang.

<sup>9</sup> The following account is based upon K. G. Izikowitz, "Notes about the Tai", *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm, No. 34, 1962, especially pp. 76-77.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.



so kind and the spirit of the great town (who was the guardian spirit of the place of old when there were many buffaloes). We invite the Great Spirit to come and partake." Then followed a whole row of names of different spirits.

Unfortunately Izikowitz does not provide the "whole row of names". Of the different powers invoked, apart from the citation above, there is no other account but that they are: "spirits which guard the village, spirits of the mines, spirits of the rice fields and spirits of the green mountains." In order to determine whether the spirits have accepted the invitation one of the priests takes some rice, counts the grains and if the number is even it is a positive sign. The men then eat and drink together. The remainder of the meal is taken back to the village to be shared with women and children.

Further interesting details are the fact that during the ceremony the village is totally cut off from the rest of the world; no stranger being allowed to enter or leave the community. Hexagonically plaited bamboo trays are set upright on bamboo sticks, on each of the four paths leading up to the village. These are interdiction symbols, known throughout many Tai communities as *talao*.<sup>11</sup> After the sacrifice, at a different location, two teams gathered, one of boys and one of girls. These enacted a ritual tug-of-war. On that occasion the girls' team won, not altogether unexpectedly, since it is held to portend a good harvest. This ritual tug-of-war has probably no connection with the sacrifice for Phii Mueang. It appears to be more related to the New Year celebrations. It has been reported for many Tai peoples and it can still be witnessed amongst some of the Assamese Tai. An analysis of that aspect falls outside the scope of this book.

Quite independently, and apparently unaware of Izikowitz' field notes, is Deydier's account of his discussions with Lue village elders about the Phii Mueang sacrifice. At Ou Thai the ceremony for Phii Mueang occurs only once every three years, always around November. It is presided over by two priests, the eldest of whom says the necessary prayers. The offerings consist of four chickens, two for each priest, and a black buffalo. The chickens have been killed before they are taken to the offering place, which is situated near a huge tree at the north side of the village. The buffalo is taken alive to the tree and bound to it. A man, specially hired for that purpose, kills it with a sabre. He also cuts the animal up in twelve parts and these are laid inside the spirit's shrine, eight of these in the name of the chief priest and four for his helper. During the prayer a small amount of alcoholic beverage is poured on the ground in front of the tree. The manner in which the animal has fallen gives rise to predictions about the community's future. If the buffalo has died stretching his legs in the village's direction a good year may be expected. If they point, however, to the forest, it is a bad omen. When Deydier, who had observed similar customs amongst the Lao, asked whether the liver was examined, or whether the direction of the stream of blood was given any special meaning, he obtained a negative

<sup>11</sup> The Shan also use it as protection and boundary sign. See H. E. Kauffmann, *national Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences*, Volume IX, Moscow, 1970, p. 424. "Thread-square and Talao in Indo-China", *Proceedings of the VIIIth Inter-*

answer. It was also noted that during the ceremony strangers have no access to the village.<sup>12</sup>

Not long afterwards Deydier had the opportunity to discuss the same ceremony at Ou Neua, another Lue community. Reputedly the offering there consists of two buffaloes, one black and one white. The proper time of the year is September. Deydier reports the use of a shrine, called *ho phii mueang*, and refers to the spirit called Phii Mueang as one who lives in a tree.<sup>13</sup> During the great sacrifice all kitchen fires in the village must be extinguished, so that the spirit of the kitchens can attend the ceremony. The two buffaloes are tied on poles in front of the Phii Mueang tree. The sacrifice can take place only after the spirit has accepted the offering and in order to discover the spirit's opinion, a cock is asked the relevant question. If the cock crows three times the sacrifice is acceptable. The buffaloes are killed with the help of a lance. The priest addresses the spirits in the Tai language, but, in order to make it intelligible to the spirits he reverses each word. Each animal is divided into six portions.

There is thus no doubt that the Phii Mueang sacrifice forms part of the Lue tradition.<sup>14</sup> There are a number of differences between the various accounts. One village holds the ceremony in May, one in September and another in November. At one ritual there are three priests, two of them presiding over gifts to nearby salt mines. A buffalo may be fastened to a pole or to a tree. These detailed accounts show, however, that in all cases the same ritual is celebrated. Everywhere it is a buffalo offer in honour of one or more guardian spirits, and to this offer other deities may be invited. In all cases it takes place just outside the village. In the three reported Lue cases the offering is presented as twelve separate portions of meat.<sup>15</sup> In all cases there is a prayer asking for continued protection and there is a method of watching how the buffalo falls in order to predict the future. In all reported cases a huge tree is considered to be the place where the deities can best be contacted.

### The Nua

In the literature only one account of Nua sacrifice was encountered. It concerns the story of how a destructive fire had raged, during which one Nua village had completely burnt out. Another Nua community had managed to escape this danger:<sup>16</sup>

... The Tai Nua village just below our Mission compound was not burnt.

The people said it was because they had killed a dog when the flames were at their height, and threw it in the flames to appease the spirit of the fire. This report establishes beyond doubt that, under very special circumstances the Nua performed a dog sacrifice. It gives no idea regarding the possibility

<sup>12</sup> H. Deydier, *Lokapala, Dämonen, Totems und Zauberer von Nord-Laos*, Berlin: Nauck & Co., 1954, pp. 97-98.

<sup>13</sup> Another informant called the tree spirit Phii Faa.

<sup>14</sup> Lafont also is aware of the existence of the custom. See P.-B. Lafont, "Le That de Muong-Sing", *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, N.S.,

Volume XXXII, Pt. 1, 1957, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> The twelve portions are related to the twelve shrines erected in "The World of the Then" after the arrival of Khun Borom. Personal communication with Professor C. Archaimbault, December 1980.

<sup>16</sup> W.C. Dodd, *The Tai Race, Elder Brother of the Chinese*, Cedar Rapids: The Torch Press, 1923, p. 215.

that the Nua may have held regular communal sacrifices. Also the report lacks certain details which would have increased its value for this study, such as whether the dog ought to be of a certain colour, in what manner the animal was killed, and by whom. Nevertheless, especially in the light of the findings amongst the Assamese Tai, it remains interesting to note that, at this occasion of great emergency and need, the Nua resorted to animal sacrifice, and that they chose a dog as the animal most likely to appease the threatening power.

### The Yuan

In some of the old chronicles of the region which is inhabited by the Yuan regular buffalo sacrifices are mentioned. Thus, at the end of the chronicle of Mahathera Fa Bot it is recounted how, at the beginning of each year, in April, people took an unblemished male black buffalo as food for Grandfather Sae, and offered it at the foot of the mountain Doi Suthep, north of Chiang Mai. Another buffalo was given to Grandmother Sae at the foot of a mountain to the south, named Doi Kham, on the north bank of the river Mae Hia. For this sacrifice, a painting on cloth, some nine yards tall, depicting a standing Buddha in the style of his first preaching is obtained. This image is suspended from a tree at the sacrificial site. Then nine monks, who have recently been ordained, are invited to recite prayers around this image. As to the buffalo meat that is left after the offering to the spirits, if the people and the monks have not eaten it all it must be buried; no part of this sacrificial meat may be taken home.<sup>17</sup>

This is a remarkable account, which, without explanatory remarks must make a peculiar impression upon readers who are not familiar with Tai customs. The important qualification mentioned regarding the monks who are invited to attend the sacrifice is: "who have recently been ordained". It may safely be surmised that nine monks who have not long ago entered the Sangha will be unable to chant prayers in unison. It takes usually years before a monk can confidently join a chapter for a public chanting session. Indeed, it may be expected that the chanting on this occasion must have sounded pitiful and muddled. This is the intention of the organisers of the ceremony: the caricature of a Buddhist chanting session is believed to provoke the gods into sending down rain.<sup>18</sup> The inclusion of the Buddhist monks at this sacrifice is therefore to be regarded as an aspect of Tai rain-making ceremonial, a subject which falls outside the scope of this book. At the same time, the inclusion of Buddhist monks and a Buddha image may be regarded as a measure of how important the sacrificial tradition once was. It has been noted for some areas of Laos that:<sup>19</sup>

many Buddhist monks, without batting an eyelid, watch how fowls and pigs are offered during temple feasts. They are first Tai, and Buddhists only in the second place.

As to the sacrifices at the foot of mountains around Chiang Mai, Notton, writing in the 1920s, says that it is still observed, although it seems to be

<sup>17</sup> C. Notton (translator), *Annales du Siam*, Volume I, Paris: Imprimerie Charles Lavaluzelle, 1926, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> One of the rain-making ceremonies occasionally still observed in central Thai-

land consists of letting a group of monks chant in a field. During this chanting minor breaches of conduct are tolerated and even encouraged.

<sup>19</sup> H. Deydier, *Lokapala*, pp. 100-101.

falling into abeyance. The buffalo sacrifice at Doi Kham now takes place in the month of June if the rains are late.<sup>20</sup>

Notton mentions various other sacrifices which were regularly held in the region. One of these was held at Ban Na for the spirit called Pho Luang Chung Cha. The kings of Chiang Mai and the people living between Chiang Mai and Raheng used to venerate this spirit and at regular intervals they offered a buffalo sacrifice. From the time that Ban Na was placed under the administration of Raheng, the authorities stopped the custom, for buffaloes were considered too valuable to be killed. Furthermore, there used to be sacrifices at Chiang Mai city itself, both during the traditional New Year festivities and in the seventh month (here June-July). Normally chickens were killed, but in times of epidemics a pig, together with alcohol, was the appropriate gift.<sup>21</sup> In the sixteenth century, the Chinag Mai kings used to sacrifice a buffalo before setting out at war.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, there were yearly sacrifices of a black and a white buffalo. Reputedly the custom was abandoned at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> The administration's accordance and involvement with this type of sacrificial ritual during the nineteenth century is borne out by Richardson's report that each household in the region of Mueang Lakhon had to pay half a *baht* of coarse silver on account of sacrifices to the country's protecting spirits.

These sacrifices are another name for public feasts as the buffaloes, pigs, and poultry, together with the spirits, which are provided, are consumed by the people.<sup>24</sup>

Buffalo sacrifices are mentioned for various other occasions. The king of Chiang Rai, in the course of an attack on Chiang Mai, sacrificed a white buffalo before firing a cannon.<sup>25</sup> In another account, when King Tilokarat of Chiang Mai sent an army to Mueang Nan, a sacrifice was needed, which included a white buffalo, chickens, ducks, as well as gifts of mats, seats and betel chewing equipment.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, during the treaty of 1809 between the King of Chiang Mai and the ruler of another *mueang*, a buffalo was killed, its blood mixed with alcohol, and this mixture was drunk during the formal oath of friendship.<sup>27</sup> Finally, it is reported that sacrifices took place at the Chinag Mai city pillar (*lak mueang*). At the official installation of the pillar a pregnant woman was impaled, in order to create a strong and fierce protector spirit of the city.<sup>28</sup>

### The Siamese

The thirteenth century inscription of King Raam Khamhaeng of Sukhothai tells how the ruler of the kingdom has to make offerings to a mountain spirit,

<sup>20</sup> C. Notton, *Annales du Siam*, Volume I, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> P. Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Notes sur des amulettes siamoises*, *Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque de Vulgarisation*, Volume 45, 1926, pp. 35-36.

<sup>23</sup> C. Notton, *Annales du Siam*, Volume I, p. 205.

<sup>24</sup> Reported in A. R. Colquhoun, *Amongst the Shans*, New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1970, p. 256.

<sup>25</sup> C. Notton, *Annales du Siam*, Volume III, Paris: Geuthner, 1932, p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111. The text mentions thirteen fowls and thirteen thousand ducks. The latter amount seems excessive and not in line with what may be expected during Tai ceremonies. I suspect a mistake in the manuscript used by Notton. I have not been able to check this with a version of the original.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>28</sup> C. Notton, *Annales du Siam*, Volume I, p. 205.

and that, when offerings are made in an appropriate manner and when they are of the right type, the kingdom will thrive. However, when the spirit is displeased with the king's offering, the realm will be lost.<sup>29</sup> In the inscription it is not told what kind of offerings the mountain spirit considered suitable for himself, but if the royal rituals to similar protective mountain spirits in neighbouring Chiang Mai, or those which shall be described for the Lao, are taken as a guide, it may be assumed that this involved at least a buffalo sacrifice.

Hitherto nobody has suggested the possibility that Raam Khamhaeng could have condoned ritual killing. The inscription testifies elaborately of this ruler's great interest for the Buddhist religion. However, in Siam, as well as in Laos and Cambodia, the Buddhist kings have long managed to combine an active sponsorship of the Buddhist religion with a perpetuation of some forms of animal and even human sacrifice. That at least some of Sukhothai's successors, the kings of Ayutthaya, were not averse to shedding blood in a ritual manner for the benefit of their country, is attested by Jeremias van Vliet. At the beginning of the seventeenth century it was the accepted custom to impale pregnant women in the holes where fortifications were to be built. This was done simply in order to create guardian spirits who would help prevent the enemy from taking the city. In 1634 the Ayutthayan king ordered that sixty-four expecting women be arrested and prepared to be transformed into fierce protective spirits. The king's orders were followed, but before the ceremony could take place an extraordinary large number of them gave birth, thus disqualifying themselves for the honour. This was taken as a sign that such a large number may not have been auspicious and eventually only four women were actually killed.<sup>30</sup> There can be no doubt as to the accuracy of this account.

There are persistent reports of very similar human immolations at the times when a new city pillar (*lak mueang*) was installed. In contrast with the human sacrifices under the foundations of fortifications, none of these reports rest upon eyewitness accounts. Therefore it may be argued that it remains an open question whether human beings were actually buried under the city pillar.<sup>31</sup> If this is proven, one day, it appears that the custom of creating a fierce guardian spirit under the fortifications, which is also reported for places outside Siam, may have attached itself to customs surrounding the *lak mueang*.

Other than the above-mentioned state ceremonies, there are very few accounts of Siamese ritual blood-sacrifices. Phya Anuman Rajadhon refers once to a custom whereby the owner of a field sacrifices a fowl. This is

<sup>29</sup> A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "The Inscription of King Rama Gamhen of Sukhodaya", *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, No. 9, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume 59, Pt. 2, 1971, p. 214.

<sup>30</sup> L. F. van Ravenswaay translated van Vliet's "Description on the Kingdom of Siam", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume VII, 1910, pp. 18-20.

<sup>31</sup> Note, for example, Mgr. Bruguière's account in *Annales de l'Association de la Propagation de la Foi*, 1831, quoted by

J. B. Pallegoix, *Description du royaume Thai ou Siam*, Farnborough: Gregg International, 1969, Volume 2, pp. 50-52. This has been translated into English by H. G. Q. Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function*, London: Quaritch, 1931, p. 305. Pallegoix adds that he does not wish to vouch for the account. For details, see B. J. Terwiel, "The Origin and Meaning of the Thai City Pillar", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume 66, Pt. 2, 1978, pp. 161-62.



done once a year, at the beginning of the rice-planting season. After the sacrifice, the fowl's tongue bone is examined to see whether the season will be good.<sup>30</sup> In order to find references to Siamese sacrifices I checked through scores of publications which have Thai customs as their subject. Thus far this search has yielded no results. The nearest these books come to mentioning an animal sacrifice is when they report that a person ought to offer some meat on certain occasions when a spirit's favour is sought. In all cases it is implied that the animal is not slaughtered near the altar, but killed somewhere else, preferably by someone else. During my own field-work in Ratchaburi province I witnessed and took part in such a ceremony, which, in this instance, was intended to invoke the powers in order to make a batch of young men, who had recently been tattooed, invulnerable. This ceremony was held in the most sacred place, namely on the platform in front of the main Buddha image in the Buddhist temple. Amongst the gifts which were prominently displayed on this platform were a pig's head and four trotters, obtained from the butcher's in the nearby provincial capital. Later the head was cooked and shared amongst all those who participated in the ritual. A similar ritual is described in the famous Siamese poem *Seephaa rueang Khun Chaang Khun Phaen*, when Khun Phaen and Phlai Kaew raise the spirits in order to obtain invulnerability. They offer a pig's head, chickens and ducks.

Although at present the Siamese appear to refrain from blood sacrifices, they have maintained in the rural areas a rich tradition of village guardian spirits. Such guardian spirits have a shrine, often at the periphery of the built-up area and a communal food-offering (*liang*) often occurs just before the monsoon rains are due. Gifts to the village guardian spirits include usually alcohol, boiled chicken, boiled eggs, and locally made cigarettes, as well as a single stick of incense, candles and flowers. Some social scientists who have carefully observed these rituals have recently reported on their findings:<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the monthly ceremony, attendance at the annual one is considered a serious obligation by the villagers. Every household is required to send a gift-laden representative and as many members of the community attend the ceremony as possible. A medium is also present. Again Puu Taa reputedly takes possession of different villagers under whose influence they will sing, joke, tease, tell stories or dance. Socially this is the one occasion that the villagers have to interact and dine together as a community. Unlike the monthly ceremony the offerings are not returned to the family compound, but consumed near Puu Taa's shrine. . . .

These details, including the aspect of spirit possession, are reminiscent of the annual communal sacrifices recorded thus far, and it is plausible that

<sup>30</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, "A Note on Divination by Ahom Deodhais", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XLIII, Pt. 1, 1955, p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> A similar substitution has taken place in Laos, where four pig's heads and sixteen trotters are amongst the gifts to the spirits. See Chao Kham Man Vongkot Rattana, "Les rites du culte des phis au ho vang-na a Luang-Prabang", *Bulletin des Amis du*

*Royaume Lao*, Volume 6, 1971, p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> Kathleen and Phornchai Sripraphai, "Puu Taa: A Description of the Guardian Spirit Cult in the Pak Phli District, Nakorn Nayok, Thailand, and its Implication for Rural-City Migration", Paper No. 8, presented at the Thai-European Seminar on Social Change in Contemporary Thailand, 28-30 May, 1980, p. 9.

the present of a boiled chicken is a survival of former sacrifices. There is no doubt that the cult of village guardian spirits is widespread in rural Thailand, for many social scientists, who were present during the presentation of the paper cited above, remarked having witnessed similar rituals in "their" rural region.

### The Tai of southern Thailand

The literature on customs of the Tai of southern Thailand is similar to that of central Thailand in that no account of ritual blood sacrifice is found amongst village customs. This probably is a reflection of the force of Buddhism in the region. However, there are customs which apparently have not been greatly influenced by Buddhist ethics and precepts. Thus, an account of ceremonies observed during an elephant drive shows that blood sacrifices were known. The sacrifice, which was intended to ask the *phii* to protect the hunters consists of:<sup>35</sup>

seven fowls, five ducks, five blue crabs, three or five horse-shoe crabs, the head or flesh of a pig, one bottle of spirit, some tubes of scorched glutinous rice as well as of ordinary rice, some tomatoes prepared with condiments as a salad, two banana-leaf cups for flowers, three green coconuts, some red sweetened cakes, and white balls made of flour or ground rice, some *khanom laa*, a cake similar to the former, rice-wafers, and some boiled rice.

After a successful hunt, a thanksgiving feast is held and for this is needed: "three ducks, three fowls, spirits...three black and three horse-shoe crabs, ...one bamboo rat..."<sup>36</sup>

### The Tai of northeast Thailand

In a Thai book on old customs in the northeast of the country, rituals for the ancestors and those for *Phii Mueang* are lumped together.<sup>37</sup> Formerly, often on the first day of the new year (April), people would kill animals such as cattle, buffaloes, pigs, ducks and fowls, and offer these to the *phii*. If these sacrifices were omitted, sickness might break out, or, even worse, rain might be withheld. Moreover, it is noticed by Somphong, that once the spirits were used to receiving a certain type of animal sacrifice, this could not be changed to a different type of gift without courting the spirits' displeasure. In the same source there is a description of a chicken sacrifice and divination practice, very similar to that mentioned by Phya Anuman Rajadhon above. This is the ritual in honour of *Phii Taa Haek*, a spirit which is propitiated when people first open a new field, and during each subsequent year. After the sacrifice and offering of the chicken the tongue-bone is removed. If the bone's membrane is elastic this is interpreted as a sign that there will be plenty of water. If it is fatty and generally looks healthy it is a sign that there will be good rainfall and that prosperity may be expected. However, if the bone is short, blunt, or deformed, there will be little rain and the rice may be expected to die in the fields.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> F. H. Giles, "An Account of the Rites and Ceremonies Observed at Elephant Driving Operations in the Seaboard Province of Lang-Suai, Southern Siam," *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XXV, Pt. 2, July 1932, p. 168. On p. 170 a

simpler version is mentioned.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>37</sup> Somphong Kriangkraiphiet (compiler), *Prapheeni Thai Boraan*, Bangkok: Prae Phitthaya, 1962, pp. 749-50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 755.

Other sacrificial customs for this region can be found in the archaic hunting rituals collected by Giles. Before the yearly hunt for the great catfish in the Mekhong River, an intricate set of placatory rituals used to take place. One of the spirits to be propitiated received cloth, five areca nuts and betel leaves, twelve leaf cups of flowers, bracelets, ear rings, sweet-meats and one or two fowls. Another would, for two years in succession receive one pig, and in the third year a buffalo. The animal would be divided up and the head, forefeet and tail would be offered on a salver. Afterwards nine separate dishes would be offered and a medium would communicate to the people the spirit's prediction of how the catch would turn out that year. Another spirit would receive pork, duck and fowl's flesh.<sup>39</sup> In a different hunting ritual described for the region, no medium was consulted, but the likelihood of good luck was determined with the help of egg divination. A boiled egg was peeled and examined carefully. If the yolk was visible through the egg white at any place, this was taken as a favourable sign.<sup>40</sup>

### The Laotians

Notwithstanding its strong Buddhist tradition, state-sponsored blood sacrifices undeniably form part of Laotian ceremonial history. For example, it is reported in the annals that the founder of the Laotian kingdom performed a sacrifice, which must have been quite spectacular, in which he offered as many as thirty-six buffaloes.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the kingdom many spirit shrines (*ho phii*) were established and each year, at the principal ones, the priest-caretaker used to receive from the government a certain sum of money to help organise the communal sacrifice. The state had set a day for the ritual, namely the eighth day of the waxing moon of the seventh month, a day which usually fell in June. This custom of partly financing the sacrifices from state funds stopped in 1918, but even after that date, many state officials would help defray the costs of some of these rituals.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike the Siamese case, where the *phii* cults apparently have lost most of their sanguine character, Buddhism has not been able to change Laotian *phii* rituals in such a manner so as to take away their vigorous nature.<sup>43</sup> Fortunately for the purpose of this study, there have been some detailed descriptions of the large blood sacrifices which have been held fairly recently. Here the outline of three of these ceremonies will be presented, so as to enable

<sup>39</sup> F. H. Giles, "An Account of the Ceremonies and Rites Performed when Catching the Pla Bük, a Species of Catfish Inhabiting the Waters of the River Me Khong, the Northern and Eastern Frontier of Siam", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XXVIII, Pt. 2, 1935, pp. 91-111.

<sup>40</sup> F. H. Giles, "An Account of the Hunting of the Wild Ox on Horse Back in the Provinces of Ubol Rajadhani and Kalasindhu, and the Rites and Ceremonies which have to be Observed", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XXVII, Pt. 1, 1934, p. 57.

<sup>41</sup> P. Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Notes sur des*

*amulettes siamoises*, pp. 34-35. Cf. C. Archaimbault, "Les annales de l'ancien royaume de S'icng Khwang", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* Volume LIII, Part 2, 1966, p. 606.

<sup>42</sup> Chao Kham Man Vongkot Rattana, "Les rites du culte des phi au ho vang-na à Luang-Prabang", p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> Regarding the strength of the Laotian *phii* cults, and their fairly harmonious symbiosis with Buddhism, see, for example, G. Condominas, "Notes sur le Bouddhisme populaire en milieu rural lao", *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, Volume 9, 1973, pp. 96-97.

the noticing of ceremonial details which are so important in comparative ethnohistory, as well as the assessment of the scope and variety of the ritual as found amongst the Lao. First a pig sacrifice in Luang Prabang is taken, then a buffalo sacrifice in Vientiane and finally the buffalo sacrifice at Vat Phu.

In Luang Prabang the sacrifice, which has been described in great detail,<sup>44</sup> takes place every year in the sixth month of the Lao year, which usually falls in May, before the agricultural year has begun. The *phii* who are the chief recipients of the sacrifice in this case are known as Grandfather Nyeu and Grandmother Nyeu. These two are the guardian spirits of the *mueang*, and also they are mythological ancestors whose masks are carefully preserved at their shrine. These masks are exposed only twice a year, namely at the traditional New Year, which falls in half-April, and in the twelfth month, at the end of the rainy season. According to Archambault the cult of masks was formerly also found in Sieng Khwang, where, at the second half of the nineteenth century five masks were destroyed. When these masks are exposed, they are used in a ritual dance. In Chapter 2 of this volume I have already pointed out that it is possible that the Ahom once used an ancestral mask. Thus far the cult of these masks, which in Laos is quite striking, for the masks depict black faces, bulging eyes and open mouth, with masses of long string, by way of hair, enveloping the bearers, has received insufficient attention.<sup>45</sup> During the rituals for these *Phii Mueang* of Luang Prabang in May, at an early stage of the ceremonies, six *talaes* signs are placed around the altar. A black-coloured piglet, donated by the community, is taken and killed. The blood is collected, the hair removed, and then the animal is cut into pieces and boiled, together with four hens, which are also offered to the great spirits. The pig's liver and stomach are cleaned and also dropped in the big pot with boiling meat. The intestines, after rubbing and cleaning, are toasted above a fire. Meanwhile the altar is prepared. A pole, about two metres tall, which is called the *lak lao*, or "alcohol post", is decorated. On top of this pole a *talaes* is fastened, and halfway down a ring is attached. From this ring two chains are hung, one consists of five small bars, fastened together like rungs of a rope ladder, the other made of five rings fastened together. These chains are called the "chain of the elephant", chain of the horses". At the foot of this pillar a tray holding two containers filled with rice balls is placed, and in each of these containers two reeds are stuck, like in rice-wine containers. The reeds are connected with rattan to the post. At the appropriate place two mattresses and pillows are arranged for Grandfather and Grandmother Nyeu and above this resting place a white canopy with a red border is hung. A coconut and a pitcher of water are given by way of preliminary offerings. Nearby are a tray with six small cups, a drum, betel-chewing equipment, a teapot,

<sup>44</sup> The following paragraphs are based upon the painstaking reporting by C. Archambault in his article "Le liang du ho devata luong à Luong Prabang", *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, NS Volume XLVI, 1971, No. 2, pp. 215-85.

<sup>45</sup> C. Archambault, *Structures religieuses lao (rites et mythes)*, Vientiane: Vithagna, 1973, pp. 20-62, and his "Le liang du ho

devata luong à Luong Prabang", p. 218. The same masks, described as "grinning devils with horrible fangs, enormous ears and a tangled mane reaching the ground", are used by the agglomeration of ethnic groups in Vietnam known as the Moi. See H. Baudesson, *Indo-China and its Primitive People* (translated by E. Appleby Holt), London: Hutchinson, n.d., pp. 190-91.

six bananas and two hardboiled eggs. At some distance from the mattresses a bowl with pork, grilled viscera and a bowl of blood, as well as the four boiled chickens and two platters with the spirits' clothes are placed. There are also presents to some minor spirits, consisting of coconuts and sweets. Sugary gifts are also presented to the ancestral couple Nyeu. At the place reserved for Grandfather Nyeu two candles are lit and one on the *lak lao*. The drum is sounded and alcohol is offered to the spirits. The ritual meal is brought over to a spot near the pillows. At this stage the male medium who has been sitting next to the priest, shows signs of spirit possession and he is dressed in the clothes which have been brought especially for this purpose. A crown of flowers is placed on the head. When the spirit has descended into the medium, food and drink is presented to him, and cotton strands which are around the alcohol containers are blessed by him. The priest then, in a deferring manner asks about the prospects for the community, whether there will be epidemics, whether the rains will be abundant and whether the rice will germinate properly. The *phii* answers such questions via the medium telling, on the occasion here described that, if the spirits are properly feasted, good prospects may be expected. A ritual dance is held in front of the medium in order to please the spirit and soon afterwards the spirit suddenly leaves, hurtling the medium back onto the mattress as he does so. One by one, in a fixed order, other great spirits take his place and each of these behaves according to its traditional place in the spirit world, one performing a sabre dance, another soberly remaining seated. There is more opportunity to pose questions and some members of the audience come forward for advice regarding private problems. This concludes this stage of the ceremony which has lasted from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon. The next day is observed as one during which no work may be done (in Laotian: *kham tan*). In the evening a rattan cable is produced, the medium again falls into a trance, and in front of the shrine for the ancestors Nyeu a ritual rope-pulling takes place. There are two camps: males at the head of the rope and females at the tail end. It is important that the female side wins, else the country will know no prosperity.<sup>46</sup>

The buffalo sacrifice in Vientiane takes place some time during May or June, at the beginning of the rainy season, at a Vietnamese temple which has been built on the site of a shrine, called *ho nia*, not far from where the old city pillar (*lak mueang*) used to be situated. The ceremony affects the welfare of the whole *mueang*, and when the sacrifice was observed<sup>47</sup>, this was still half-recognised by the authorities. Several representatives of rank contribute financially and some of them attend the proceedings. A table of offerings is prepared with a mat and some cushions at the foot. A small mast is erected with a *talaao* on top and two jars of rice-alcohol and a third pitcher filled with alcohol at the base. Also there are a copper gong, a drum,

<sup>46</sup> C. Archaimbault, "Le liang du ho devata luong à Luong Prabang", p. 246.

<sup>47</sup> These details and other information on the Vientiane ritual are taken from P. Levi, "The Sacrifice of the Buffalo and the Forecast of the Weather in Vientiane", *Kingdom of Laos* (edited by R. de Berval), Saigon: France-Asie, 1959, pp. 162-73.

This sacrifice was performed every year before the transplantation of rice. Every three years another buffalo sacrifice was performed at the That Luang for the "desacrilisation of the earth". See C. Archaimbault, "Le sacrifice du buffle à l'autel du T'at Luong (Wieng Chan), *Ethnos*, Volume 40, 1975, pp. 114-49.



sabres, and numerous trays with gifts of alcoholic drinks, sweets, candles and flowers. To the south, behind the Vietnamese temple, near a big tree, the sacrificial buffalo is fastened to some small-size trees. Formerly, it is said, the buffalo used to be killed at the foot of a tamarind tree. Early in the morning a female medium goes into a trance, lets herself be possessed by a *phii*, and under the command of the *phii* she executes a few steps of a traditional dance. At nine in the morning she orders the buffalo to be killed. After an offering of alcohol and some flowers has been made at the foot of the big tree close by, the animal is hit, first on the head, then on the neck. The buffalo is beheaded and cut into pieces. Head and tail are carried to a nearby shrine containing a sacred stone which later will be used for divination; the rest of the body is carried near the table. Most of the meat is cooked, only some of it is grilled and this will be eaten by the medium. The spirit possession continues later during the morning and early in the afternoon. People may ask questions regarding possible future events. At about two o'clock the buffalo flesh is divided, large shares going to the medium and the officials who sponsor the ritual. Head and tail will form part of the medium's portion, whilst the skin will be divided between her and the officials. At around a quarter to five in the afternoon all persons proceed to the shrine which has the sacred stone. Offerings are made to the spirit of the stone. The medium dances three times around it and then douses it with water from a teapot. Immediately various experts rush forward, they lift the stone, turn it around, and scan the bottom surface. Special attention is given to noticing which areas of the under surface have become wet and which remained dry, for the stone may be read as if it were a map of the region. In this manner it can be foretold which groups of villages stand a good chance of plentiful water and which must prepare for relatively little during the coming season. A further experiment is done to see whether good or bad rains can be expected. Sabres are dipped into rice-wine containers and pulled out again. If all the moisture runs off the blades, there will be plentiful rain; if much remains clinging to the metal, rain will be withheld.

The buffalo sacrifice at Vat Phu in southern Laos occurs on the fourth day of the waxing moon in the sixth Laotian month, which usually falls in May.<sup>48</sup> Reputedly it is an ancient custom, going back to a time, long ago, when the king used to sacrifice two human beings. The buffalo is a substitute for the humans, with which the spirits will have to be satisfied. Before the shrine, two parasols indicate the place where the invisible servants of the great spirits will receive their share. Beside the shrine an "elephant post" is erected. Its function is to enable the chief spirits to tether their heavenly mounts. As soon as the chief priest, the medium, and their assistants have arrived, candles are lit on the altar, on the "elephant post" and on the central beam of the shrine itself. Mats and pillows are laid out as a welcoming gesture for the *phii*. The gong and drums are sounded whilst the medium establishes contact with the unseen spirits by throwing three pinches of rice into a bowl. As soon as a *phii* has entered his body, the medium behaves in the fashion proper for the particular spirit that has descended. A female medium also becomes possessed. A sabre dance is performed. One by one spirits descend and disappear to make way for new ones. At

<sup>48</sup> These details have been taken from *Buffalo at Vat Phu*, *Kingdom of Laos*, C. Archambault, "The Sacrifice of the" pp. 156-61.

an appropriate moment the priest informs the spirits of the fact that a sacrifice is about to be made. Some men from a nearby tribe, who have been hired for this purpose, will kill the buffalo, which has been fastened with his head against the sacrificial tree. An artery is cut open with an axe. The blood is collected in various pots and these are handed over to the presiding priest. The position in which the animal falls is interpreted as a sign for the future, and so is the state of the liver. "There is a little more gall than last year. . . On the other hand the buffalo fell parallel to the course of the Mekong. . . We shall escape drought".<sup>49</sup> The meat is boiled and offered at various places to the *phii* before it is consumed by the people.

These three examples suffice to demonstrate the basic outline of the great official sacrifices in Laos, as well as providing a multitude of details which will aid in the analysis. Archaimbault has considered these, and many other ceremonies for Laos as a whole, and has come to recognise an overall pattern. In his assessment the rituals in April, May and June are often related to a wish to inaugurate the rainy season, often it is clear that they are literally intended to draw the waters into the fields. He has been able to relate this in places with topographical features of the Laotian countryside, drawing a sketch of a "cosmological map" of parts of Laos. The rituals around the twelfth month, in Archaimbault's view, form a neat conclusion of those held before the monsoon: they are intended to induce the waters to retreat and thus make it possible for the earth to come into equilibrium.<sup>50</sup> In this book Archaimbault elaborates an hypothesis based upon a reinterpretation of the aim of this sacrifice with respect to the boat-racing ritual, on which the sacrifice has been grafted.<sup>50</sup>

Hopefully I have been able to do some justice to this scholar whilst attempting to summarise a difficult book in a single paragraph. In broad lines I find that the analysis of the pre-monsoon rituals confirms some of the themes stressed in this book. The series of post-monsoon activities, which these Laotians have juxtaposed and connected with the earlier ones, may or may not be so connected. Personally I feel that the two sets of rituals may represent rather two sets of new-year celebrations, one at the beginning of the agricultural cycle, the other harking back to a time when the calendar was different. This earlier stage is described and developed further in later parts of this book.

From the ethnographic accounts it is clear that women in Laos are generally allowed to attend the buffalo sacrifices. Usually women are not barred from entry even in the inner shrine. There is one exception to this general rule, only at the shrine of the Grandparents Nyeu at Luang Prabang are women prohibited to enter the inner sanctuary unless they have come to bring special offerings in order to fulfil a promise to these two ancestral spirits.<sup>51</sup> Of interest for the student of comparative ritual is the detailed description of a Laotian chicken divination. The chicken's tongue bone is pulled out and given to a village elder who examines the position of the central tongue bone in relation to the two upright branches left and right. A vertical position of the central tongue bone is favourable, a bending in

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>50</sup> C. Archaimbault, *La course de pirogues au Laos: un complexe culturel*, Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1977. In this work there are further

descriptions of buffalo sacrifices (p. 56 sq. and p. 67 sq.) and some illustrations (Plates 25-27).

<sup>51</sup> C. Archaimbault, "Le liang du ho devata luong à Luang Prabang", p. 274.

the direction of the branches is ominous, and a bending inverse to that of the branches spells disaster.<sup>52</sup> In the light of the findings amongst the Assamese Tai there is yet a final detail which ought to be reported. This concerns the shrine of Grandfather Muet at Luang Prabang, which receives special attention once a year in connection with rituals around the city shrine (*that*). At that time there is a circumambulation of the Grandfather Muet shrine. Once every three years, during the seventh month (June), there used to be a red dog sacrifice. This red dog was given the name of "golden deer". No further details are available on Grandfather Muet, other than that he was sometimes called "lord of the earth" (Chao Din), and that he was considered the ancestor of the Kha aborigines.<sup>53</sup> There is yet another report regarding a dog sacrifice, this time for a female Kha spirit, and also there the dog flesh is also known as "golden deer".<sup>54</sup>

### The Tai Neua

There is a short account of the annual great communal sacrifice of the Tai Neua. This is celebrated in honour of the tutelary spirit of the village and the region (Phii San), which is identified with the spirit of a chief who has recently died. On this occasion<sup>55</sup> all the guardian spirits of the *mueang* are also honoured. Just outside the village is the place of the sacred grove of the village and nearby this grove there is a permanent shrine on stilts. After the village headman has decided upon the date for the sacrifice, this shrine is repaired and all inhabitants share in the cost of buying a buffalo. Over all paths leading to the village a thread is strung with a notice attached, stating during which days the community will be closed; strangers will not be allowed in, nor will those from the village be allowed to go out.

The buffalo is killed in front of the shrine and immediately the animal is divided up. The meat is placed in copper bowls and cooked. All parts, including the skin, will be consumed. On miniature plates small amounts of the different parts of the buffalo will be put and presented to the spirits. There will be a bit of meat, some liver, heart, lung, and entrails. The headman will present these parts of the buffalo, together with alcoholic drinks, first to the main spirits and then to those of lesser rank. Each of these lesser ranking spirits receives an offering suitable to its taste: one may receive a goat, another a dog, one always is presented a hen, and another a duck. The sacrificial gifts are left undisturbed for some time so as to give the spirits a chance to accept them, then the community of humans consume the meats and drinks. Some of the meat will be sent, packed in banana leaf, to surrounding communities whose members could not attend. These rituals are solemnly performed and last three days. Amongst the ritual objects drums are mentioned.

Apart from this great communal festival, Bourlet mentions also domestic sacrifices, presided over by the eldest of the house, during which a few fowls may be killed and offered to the ancestors.<sup>56</sup> Commonly used methods of

<sup>52</sup> C. Archaimbault, *La course de pirogues*, p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> C. Archaimbault, "Une cérémonie en l'honneur des génies de la mine de sel de Ban Bo (Moyen Laos)", in *Structures religieuses lao*, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> R. Pascal, "Notes sur les rites de

possession observés à Dong Dok (Vientiane, 1971)", *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, Volume 6, 1971, p. 213.

<sup>55</sup> A. Bourlet, "Les Thay", *Anthropos*, Volume 2, 1907, pp. 625-7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 362-63.

divination are the pushing of an egg into a bowl of rice and noticing whether or not any grains stick to it and the shuffling of a bunch of thirty-two sticks in positions between the fingers of both hands in order to read the message of the unseen powers.<sup>57</sup>

### The Black and the White Tai

According to Maspero, both Black and White Tai celebrate a feast for Phii Mueang (there it is called *fi nuong*). It is the most important ceremony of the year. Phii Mueang lives at a big tree in the middle of a sacred grove where no-one is allowed to break the branches, at the entrance to the main village of a region. The ceremony in honour of the Phii Mueang takes place in the first month of the local time-reckoning, which corresponds with July-August, just when the rice in the fields is beginning to form new eaves.<sup>58</sup> This time of the year is not, however, universally accepted amongst Black and White Tai, the White Tai of Phong-Tho, for example, hold their buffalo sacrifice twice a year,<sup>59</sup> and those of Lai Chau time the first of these occasions in April-May, and the second in their eleventh month, which corresponds with September-October. The first of these occasions is seen as one during which the water-spirit Ngueak is asked to bring rain and invade the rice fields, whilst the second buffalo offer is an opportunity to demand his retreat.<sup>60</sup> In Maspero's account the ritual is described as one during which all the gods of heaven and earth are invited. During it, the territory of the *mueang* is closed to outsiders. A buffalo is killed and the head, paws, tail, as well as bits of liver, intestines and boiled blood, are placed on a platter with rice, alcohol and betel, at the foot of the *phii's* tree. At Mueang Bom this varies somewhat in that there the severed buffalo head is attached to the tree where the spirit dwells.<sup>61</sup> The priest, who has prepared for his role by fasting for three days before the ceremony, now says the appropriate lengthy prayers and the animal is divided and eaten amongst the villagers. It is clear from the account of the array of powers which are invoked during the prayer, that all major *phii's* are called. Mention is made of the ruler of heaven, Po Then Luong, and specific other *thens* for the various clans. In addition there is the *phii* who looks after the wind, one of the rain, one of thunder. There are the guardian of marriage rules, the gods and goddesses of the earth, of the moon and of the stars, the gods of the waters, the *phii* Mueang himself, with his group of subordinates who look after individual small villages and hamlets, and finally the gods of the mountains. From all these, assistance is asked to obtain a good crop, peace and wealth.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 621-22.

<sup>58</sup> These details are taken from H. Maspero, *Le Taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1971, pp. 249-52. This seems to be also the source for Zago's account of the Phii Mueang sacrifice of the Black Tai, for he includes Maspero's doubtful translation of *lak xeu* as a place for depositing cloth. See M. Zago, *Rites et ceremonies en milieu bouddhiste lao*, Roma: Universita Gregoriana,

1972, p. 185. In my opinion the word *xeu* is more likely to refer to "guardian spirit".

<sup>59</sup> Le Capitaine Silvestre, "Les Thai Blancs de Phong-Tho", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 18, 1918, pp. 50-51.

<sup>60</sup> H. Deydier, *Lokapala*, p. 233.

<sup>61</sup> P. Lévi, "The Sacrifice of the Buffalo", p. 171.

<sup>62</sup> H. Maspero, *Le Taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, pp. 249-52.

### The Red Tai

Every year, during the sixth month, the village chief orders a buffalo or a pig sacrifice. He provides glutinous rice, distilled alcohol, jars and betel. Plates are prepared with glutinous rice, various meats, soup, the head of the sacrificed animal, and a dish prepared from the animal's leg. They are presented, with the aid of appropriate formulae, to the ancestors, to the Phii Mueang (or, if there is no alliance with such a large unit, to the guardian spirit of the hamlet itself), and to Phii Naa (the guardian spirit of the rice fields).<sup>63</sup>

Most of Robert's monograph is devoted to witchcraft and magical healing practices. These are by themselves a fascinating set of customs, which would be eminently suited to a cross-Tai comparative analysis, but this clearly falls outside the scope of this book. Yet there are a few ritual details in the account of Red Tai healing customs which may help this present enquiry. Among the Red Tai there is a class of healers who rely upon spirit-helpers with whom they can establish and maintain contact by offering appropriate presents and allowing themselves to fall into a trance. These presents consist of a tray, covered with white cloth, a number of cups, a quantity of uncooked rice in which a raw egg is placed with its point upwards, a wax candle of about forty centimetres in height which is surrounded by smaller candles, small "flowers" fashioned from a twig of wood and some cotton thread as well as a "crossbow" made of wax, a few silver bracelets and some bars of silver for the *phii*. The number of cups and small candles may be four, eight, or twelve, the larger amounts being reserved for the more important occasions. Together with the tray some alcohol and a meat offering must be given. On the largest occasions, whereby a "tray of twelve" (*khai xep xong*), to wit, twelve cups and twelve candles, is given, a buffalo may be sacrificed.<sup>64</sup>

Once every three years a practising medium-healer must give a large feast for his main contact in the spirit world, and on this occasion he invites his colleagues. This ceremony is quite distinct from the communal ritual described above, but through examining the details, aspects of the Red Tai pantheon are revealed. The inhabitants of his village (his patients) help with the preparations. In the hall of the reception room a large bamboo mast is set up from which objects made of wood and thread, such as flowers, miniature boats, drums, and birds are hung. There also is a "tray of twelve" and a pig is sacrificed. During the opening address the spirits of the ancestors, the guardian spirits of village and *mueang*, those of the mountains, forests, rivers, and cemeteries are invited to attend. The great heavenly spirits come down on their invisible horses and elephants and express themselves with the help of various medium-healers in trance. These gods, in the bodies of their mediums, walk around the hall to inspect it. The host's teacher, the man who has initiated him in the healing techniques, has the honour of having the great god In to possess him, and it is to In that the pig is offered. This spirit In, in his turn, will carry the pig sacrifice to the most important god, Father Then. It is In who leads the negotiations

<sup>63</sup> R. Robert, *Notes sur les Tay Dông de Lang Chanh (Thanh-hoa-Annam)*, Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme, Mémoire No. 1, Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1941, p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.



with the various powers for a promise of continued support for the host, so that the latter may continue his medical practice.<sup>65</sup>

Amongst the various Red Tai customs, two divination techniques have been encountered. The first one consists of placing an egg vertically in a bowl of rice and throwing some of the rice over the egg, predicting beforehand whether one or two grains will remain on top. The other, which is used before going out hunting, consists of examining a sacrificed fowl's right foot. The diviner looks for the position of the "blood point". If it lies at one of the joints, it bodes evil, but if it lies under a fleshy part this indicates success. The place where the "blood point" can be found indicates also what type of game will be shot. A final item of interest for this research is the information that a formal oath of the Red Tai may involve the drinking of chicken's blood mixed with alcohol.<sup>66</sup>

### The Chuang

In some ancient Chinese notes about the Chuang it has been reported that these practise fowl divination, of which they possess eighteen types. Bamboo rods which are straight and close to the chicken bone predict good fortune, but those which are curved and far from the bone indicate bad luck.<sup>67</sup> There is little doubt that this concerns a somewhat garbled account of the technique of pushing slivers of bamboo in small holes in fowls' thigh bones described in Chapter 3. In addition it is mentioned that during the making of an alliance wine and meat are offered and sometimes a dog may be killed.<sup>68</sup>

### The Nhang

A single source provides a vague glimpse into customs amongst the Nhang, which may be related to those already noted above. Abadie reports that certain Nhang villages have guardian spirits in whose honour grand ceremonies are organised at various times. These feasts last from three to six days, depending upon the locality, and during the celebrations the villagers are not allowed to leave their village. The rituals consist of offerings and feasts. The village is also prohibited terrain for strangers, and all access roads carry warnings stating until when it is closed.<sup>69</sup>

For other eastern groups only a few vague reports have thus far been encountered, which indicate that these also have a sacrificial tradition. Thus, the Tho in China sacrifice fowls and pigs, and they worship chiefly at unroofed shrines at spots considered sacred.<sup>70</sup> The Chung Chia perform offerings in front of trees, which they believe to be "spirit trees".<sup>71</sup> Such remarks clearly fit in with what has been observed for other Tai groups. They also indicate the need for detailed ethnographic reports.

<sup>65</sup> For further details, see pp. 73-75.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson Ling, *Recherches ethnographiques sur la race Yao dans l'Asie du Sud-est*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1929, p. 109.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>69</sup> M. Abadie, *Les races du Haut-Tonkin de Phong-tho à Lang-son*, Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1924, p. 91.

<sup>70</sup> W. C. Dodd, *The Tai Race*, p. 149.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

## Analysis

### a) *The annual communal sacrifice*

The reconstruction of Assamese Tai communal sacrifices, together with the description of the large-scale Ahom *uum phra* offerings, may now be considered in connection with the material collected in the first part of this chapter. Even though most of the accounts are sketchy and incomplete, there is sufficient detail at hand to recognise patterns and similarities. The Khamyang Raaz Daew, the Phakey sacrifice for Phii Suea Mueang, the Khamti Phii Mueang ritual, the Ahom *uum phra*, the Lue offering for Phii Mueang, some of the Yuan buffalo offerings dedicated to Grandparents Sae, the annual gifts to village guardian spirits in central Thailand, the New Year sacrifices of the Tai in northeastern Thailand, the Lao *ho phii* rituals, the annual Neua offer to Phii San, the feasting in honour of Phii Mueang amongst the Black, White and Red Tai, all these seem to be variations on a single theme. They are all intended for the benefit of the community at large, they are held at specific moments of the year, the same type of localised spirit is prominent amongst the powers which may be addressed, all these ceremonies take place outside the habitated area, and all involve similar sacrifices.

Regarding the time of the year which is considered suitable for holding the communal sacrifice, with one exception the available data fall neatly into two groups. By far the largest group (Khamyang, Ahom, Lue, Yuan, Tai of northeastern Thailand, Lao, White Tai of Lai Chau) have their main communal ceremony in April, May or June. The second group (Khamyang, Lue, White Tai of Lai Chau) celebrate the communal ritual also in September, October or November, but this concerns a repeat performance of the one held earlier in the year. The exception concerns the Black and some of the White Tai who celebrate the ceremony in the middle of the rainy season, in July-August. Maspero, who reports on the Black and White Tai, explains this peculiar timing by pointing out that these Tai have a rather aberrant calendar, and the ritual is so timed as to coincide with their New Year.

All the Tai who celebrate the communal sacrifice in April, May or June demonstrate that there are basic connections between the moment of holding the sacrifice and the fact that the growing season is imminent. This interwovenness is stressed especially by the fact that so often divination is used which is intended to find out whether the coming season will be prosperous and whether or not the rains will be good. The examination of the direction in which a buffalo falls (Lue, Lao), or of the manner in which the blood flows (Lao), of the liver's condition (Khamyang, Lao), of the manner in which lamps burn (Khamyang), and of the places where a stone has become wet (Lao), all these are different ways of doing the same thing: looking for a sign of how the rainy season will develop. Sometimes a more direct method of discovering what lies in store is used. The Khamyang, Ahom, Siamese, and Lao can question the gods directly on this matter as soon as certain skilled persons have gone into trance. On two occasions (Lue and Lao) a ritual tug-of-war was held during the concluding stages of the communal festival. This ritual tug-of-war is probably a much older type than the one, described in Volume I,

whereby a coffin with the corpse of a famous Buddhist monk is pulled to and fro on the cremation ground. The non-Buddhist tug-of-war is even more widespread amongst the Tai. Apart from the two cases mentioned above whereby the tug-of-war has attached itself to communal sacrifices, they are sometimes held as a separate ritual (Phakey), or often they are attached to the New Year celebrations themselves. In all these cases the tug-of-war is held between a men's and a women's team, and always it is considered a good omen when the women's team wins. There is little doubt that the rope-pulling ritual is originally a ceremony for obtaining rain.<sup>72</sup> When they are combined with Phii Mueang sacrifices these tugs-of-war seem to underline the seasonal character of the ceremony. In this case it could be regarded as an extension of the divination and questioning techniques in order to discover whether the rains will be good. By letting the women win the game of rope-pulling, the chances of plentiful rains are improved.

The general character of the communal sacrifice may thus be described as a joint effort to make contact with the *mueang's* guardian spirit and other members of the Tai pantheon, to present these spirits with some of their favourite foods and drinks, and to persuade them to do their best and let the season be good. After these offerings, and when the prospects have been examined through omens and through questioning the gods personally, the farmers have at least some idea of what to expect. Since the beginning of the monsoon is a crucial time in the yearly cycle of work, this ceremony has assumed for Tai rice growers the character of an annual ritual highlight, an occasion of overriding importance in the traditional religious cycle. Even in regions where Tai farmers, under influence of new developments, are in the process of abandoning the sacrifice, they will take it up again in a year when the rains are exceptionally late. In other cases, the sacrifices have been continued also because many Tai fear that the gods may deeply resent being suddenly deprived of gifts to which they have become accustomed. Any calamity which would occur in a village where recently the sacrifice has been stopped would be interpreted as the result of the god's wrath.

Whilst there is therefore little doubt that the large-scale communal sacrifice is intimately connected with the imminence of the monsoon, this does not account for the few cases where a second sacrifice is held later in the year. It has already been mentioned that, at least for the rituals in Laos, Archaimbault has stated the opinion that these may be the tail-end of the first sacrifices, at least when seen from the perspective of the boat festival. The rituals in April, May and June help call the rising of the waters in all ponds and rivers, and the September, October or November sacrifice is intended to make the waters withdraw and thus prepare for the harvest. A similar account has been reported for the White Tai of Lai Chau. It is a neat interpretation which may reflect the thinking of some Lao and White Tai ritual specialists, yet it is not one to which I adhere. A similar, quite logical picture could be set up by "explaining" that the first set of rituals

<sup>72</sup> Three researchers who have given thought on the relationship between the tug-of-war and rain-making are Izikowitz, in "Notes about the Tai", p. 89, Archaimbault, in "Le liang du ho devata luong à

Luong Prabang", p. 248, and E. Porée-Maspero, in *Etude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, Volume I, Paris: Mouton, 1962, pp. 76-77.

from the request for a good season, and the second ritual represents the god's "reward" at the end of the season. The difficulty especially with the second type of "explanation" is that it smacks of rationalisation, which may have been attached to the phenomena at some later stage. I suspect that there is little in the rituals and ritual objects which supports such a basic substratum.

In my opinion, the few occasions when the communal ceremony is held late in the year reflect the time when the Tai New Year was held around October and November. There can be little doubt that the April New Year is of Indian origin and that this has swept mainland Southeast Asia during the last two millennia. However, as will be described in the second part of this book, the Ancient Tai calendar began its year much later. It could be argued that this derives from a region where a northern monsoon dominated the agricultural seasons. In this view, the communal Tai sacrifice used to be held around October or November. When the Tai spread over mainland Southeast Asia, where a southern monsoon dominates, most of them changed their timing of the yearly greatest ritual to suit the seasons, and a few retained the old date.

The ritual details vary somewhat from place to place, something that may be expected for peoples scattered over such a wide region. Despite this, there are broad areas of agreement also with regard to the objects and paraphernalia used. The gifts to the guardian spirit of the *mueang* must be lavish. They consist of rice, sweets, alcoholic beverage, and meat. The animal's blood has an important role in the sacrifice, often it is carefully collected and separately presented on the altar. Almost everywhere one or more buffaloes are considered an appropriate gift, only in the smallest and more isolated villages is a pig considered sufficient. The killing is always carried out near the altar, often in the vicinity of a large tree which is considered to be specifically connected with the *Phii Mueang*. Sometimes the chief sacrificial animal is actually tied on to such a tree.

There seems to be no generally accepted favourite colour for the main sacrificial animal. Some select a white, others a black, others again both white and black, and in one instance a cream-coloured beast. In all instances, however, it is stressed that the animal must be a beautiful specimen. In no instance the sacrificial animal was old, sick, or decrepid. Substitution is not allowed: apparently the gods cannot be fooled in that respect. It is the vigour and power of the beasts which make the gifts so attractive in the eyes of the gods.

The use of ritual poles or masts presents an interesting puzzle. The Ahom have a *khot lak* near the altar for the most important deity as well as a pole with many lamps for *Doi Malung Phu Ra*, where the sacrificial animals are presented. The Lao have an "alcohol *lak*", as well as an "elephant post", the Black and White Tai a *lak seu*, and the Red Tai also use a mast with presents attached during their largest ceremony to contact the gods, as well as a large candle in all rituals where the gods descend. On first sight, the Ahom *khot lak* may have been used as the place to tether an elephant prior to its sacrifice. After all, it is called a pole for tethering elephants, it has a ring halfway down which can be used for that purpose, and, at present, a miniature carved elephant may actually be tied to that ring. There are two problems regarding this view of the purpose of the *khot lak*. In the

first place, all sacrificial animals are kept in pens at quite some distance to the *khot lak*, and all are presented to the other pole, the one for Doi Malung Phu Ra. Secondly, it seems unrealistic to expect that any pole erected by men can be secured sufficiently to hold an elephant. A solution for both these problems is suggested by the Lao ritual details where one of the ritual posts is erected for the specific purpose of tethering the great gods' invisible mounts. Apparently the Ahom and Lao masts have the same function, and no living elephants were ever tied to the pole next to the *ho lung*.

The array of masts mentioned above can be divided into two types. The first one concerns the pole with one or more rings, used for the heavenly steeds. The other type is a mast on which candles, lamps, and sometimes presents are fastened. It appears primarily to be an aid for the heavenly powers' descent to earth. It may be called a "communication pole", and the candle's light and fragrance is the guide. Despite its similar appearance, this "communication pole" may not be equated with the Shaman's mast. A Shaman priest has a mast with which he can travel into the non-human worlds. However, in the Tai rituals described above, the spirit-medium does not leave the earth at all, on the contrary, he or she receives into their respective bodies the godly forces who have descended via the "communication pole" and have tied their mounts on the tethering pole.

Another ritual detail which gains meaning when variants are studied across Tai cultures is the use of the long chains of bamboo rings during the *uum phra* ritual. These rings descend from a bamboo pole to the main altar and spread out over several others. There is little doubt that these are related to the chains of armbands and bars which hang down from poles in Laos, as well as to gifts of armbands and individual money bars amongst the Tai minority groups in northern Vietnam. Apparently these are all variations on the theme of presenting valuables to the gods. From their wide spread, it would seem that the armband may make the strongest claim to being regarded as an Ancient Tai symbol of wealth.

Whilst in this manner some ritual details may be satisfactorily explained, and even provide an occasional glimpse into what may have been an Ancient Tai custom, the comparison of certain of the variants appears, at least on first sight, quite promising on matters of greater significance. Thus it has been noted that the communal sacrifice, especially when it is held for the welfare of a fairly large polity, comprises the worship of more spirits than the guardian spirits only. This was clearest amongst the Ahom, for the *uum phra* reflects clearly the size and wealth of the Ahom realm. Apart from the Ahom case, statements indicating that a large number of Tai gods may be invited to attend the annual sacrifice came from the Lue, the Lao, the Neua, the Black Tai, the White Tai and the Red Tai. However, tantalisingly, most of these accounts lack the necessary detail to make a good analysis possible. For example, the Tai Neua give a buffalo to the most important spirits, a goat, a dog, a duck and a hen to other individual powers, each according to its taste. In broad outline this is exactly what happens in the *uum phra* of the Ahom people. If only Bourlet had provided a list of the various powers and what items were given to each, it would have been possible to assess whether the correspondence between the Ahom and the Tai Neua goes further. In this respect Maspero's account regarding the Black and White Tai sacrifice may be helpful. He enumerates the order in



which powers are invoked: celestial gods, headed by Po Then Luong, gods of wind, rain, thunder, the god who is responsible for marriage laws, gods and goddesses of sun, moon and stars, gods of the waters, then Phii Mueang and his subordinate *phiis*, and finally the gods of the mountains. It is possible, in the broadest sense, to recognise a somewhat similar order in the three Ahom divisions, with the great gods and goddesses under Lueng Don, then a series of powers connected with the earth, and finally a group of "boundary" gods, who may be similar to the Black and White Tai spirits of the mountains. Again, it is imperative to obtain the list of names in the local vernacular before it can be determined whether the Ahom traditional pantheon corresponds, or does not correspond with that of the Tai minority groups in northern Vietnam. The only names and positions readily comparable are the Ahom god Lueng Don, and the White and Black Tai god Po Then Luong. The Tai word Luong may well mean "great", or "royal". Po Then Luong is also known as Po Then by the Red Tai<sup>73</sup> and as Phanya Then or Fa Khoeun in Laos.<sup>74</sup> Disregarding the titles, such as Po (probably standing for "father") and Phanya (a high-ranking Tai title, which may be translated here as "Lord"), we obtain the series Don, and Then. Linguists will have to decide whether the two words seem related. The identification and detailed description of other powers in the Tai pantheon is a task which still needs to be performed. On first sight this will be a very fruitful field for detailed comparison which may eventually throw light upon the Ancient Tai perception of the environment.

Another line of investigation which presents itself when the Tai communal sacrifices are surveyed, is the importance of trance in traditional Tai religion. In the material collected above it has been noted how the Ahom, the Khamyang, the Siamese, the Lao and the Red Tai have a respectable place and a fixed role for the spirit medium who may receive one or more of the gods in his or her body. The institutionalised role of the spirit medium is much wider than even the above-related accounts would suggest. During my own fieldwork in central Thailand several village people were encountered who were regularly the vehicle of a specific spirit. One man acted as the vehicle for a long-deceased monk, for whom a shrine had been erected near the outskirts of a village. Another, a woman, had a well-established relationship with a spirit whom she identified as a younger relative of the provincial Phii Mueang. She had made a big altar at home and, for a suitable honorarium, let herself be possessed, whenever individuals wanted advice from the powers. Similar practices are also very popular among the Yuan, where regularly a large number of spirit-media come together.<sup>75</sup> A pattern spanning Tai peoples from west to east emerges and it may be assumed that aspects of this go back to the time when the Tai formed still a relatively homogeneous culture.

Virtually ubiquitous is the custom of closing the village during the ritual sacrifice. Everywhere amongst the Tai strangers are not allowed to enter, neither are members of the community permitted to leave. There is little doubt that this custom is intimately connected with the fact that the

<sup>73</sup> R. Robert, *Notes sur les Tay Dông*, p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> C. Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*, p. 110 and p. 115.

<sup>75</sup> V. Zühlsdorff, "The Witch Doctors of Chiangmai", *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens*, Hamburg, No. 112, 1972, pp. 79-85.

sacrifices which are here analysed are intended for the whole community. For the duration of the ceremonies the village becomes a sacred precinct, and its holiest place, just next to where the people live, becomes the proper place where gods may be received. That is why profane actions, such as labour in the fields, unhusking of rice and cooking in the houses should not take place. Linguists may later decide whether or not the Assamese Tai concept *kam*, which serves to indicate the state of separation, is linguistically related to the Lao and Siamese concept *kham*, also used to indicate separation. Two different methods have been described to indicate to the outside world that the community is in such a state of isolation. One is the use of white cotton thread, strung over the entrance roads, sometimes with a written message attached stating the duration of the prohibitions. A variant of this method consists of the total encircling of a community with such a thread (Khamyang). A second way consists of the use of interdiction signs, usually called *talaeo*. This symbol is reported for a considerable range of Tai peoples (Shan, Lue Yuan, Siamese, Lao and Red Tai) and probably goes back to a fairly early time in Tai history, however, the distribution of the use of this symbol does not seem to include any of the furthestmost western groups of Tai.

Finally there are two accounts (Khamyang and Lue) of a strict prohibition on women to attend the communal sacrifice. It has been indicated that the Khamyang may have developed this aspect relatively recently as a result of events that took place after they began their intrusion into Assam. For the Lue there is no information which could help understand the prohibition. In theory, a case could be built up in which it is argued that the Khamyang and the Lue represent but two extreme examples of a much more general exclusion of women. It could be pointed out that reputedly in the Yuan region it is not considered proper for women to step on the platform which monks use for chanting and meditation. In central Thailand there is a strong tradition of keeping women from magically charged objects.<sup>76</sup> In Laos it has been reported that, unless they have some ritual to perform, women ought not to be in the shrine for the Grandparents Nyeu. However, it would be false and misleading to present this material without also pointing out that there are many Tai groups, especially rather isolated and traditional groups, whereby no such prohibitions are found, and where women are by no means barred from attending the community's most sacred rituals. In Laos it has also be noted that women are not barred from the shrines during other *phii* cults. Altogether the evidence reads that the Khamyang and Lue form the exceptional cases. It is quite possible that some of the exclusion is the result of the influence of Buddhism, a creed which is rather male-oriented.

#### b) *Human sacrifices*

In the overview there are several accounts of Tai peoples sacrificing humans. Two groups (Ahom and Shan) may have included humans amongst the offerings during a royal funeral. This may well represent a local extension of the general Tai custom of killing animals and destroying objects in order to turn them into gifts to the departing souls, described in Volume I. Sacri-

<sup>76</sup> B. J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic, An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph, No. 24, London: Curzon Press, 1979, p. 92 *et passim*.

fices under town fortifications have been reported for the Shan and the Siamese. These form a very limited geographical spread, typical of a local development or a rather recent adoption under influence from other cultures. The custom may have extended itself to include the stories of the foundation sacrifices under the pillar for Phii Mueang, which has been reported for the Yuan, the Siamese and the Laotians. It is unlikely that such pillar sacrifices belonged to the Ancient Tai tradition, because in various accounts of rituals around such pillars for other, more traditional Tai groups, there are none describing a sacrifice underneath the pole. Finally there are a few accounts of human sacrifices to appease a specific spirit. Every year the Ahom killed a young man for Phii Mae Thao. The Shans may regularly have sacrificed four young women in order to satisfy a spirit living near a lake, and there is a report from southern Laos that formerly the kings sacrificed one male and one female, the buffalo sacrifice being now substituted for this. These three accounts do not form a pattern. It has been shown how the Ahom kings did establish the Phii Mae Thao offerings after the model of an older, local cult and under the influence of a specific type of Hinduism. The remaining two cases are rather vague accounts and unsubstantiated. They do not show any similarity to each other with respect to the type of spirit to whom the offering is intended. It is quite possible that such sacrifices did occur, but if this were the case, the practice seems to represent some isolated developments. Therefore it is not warranted, with the information at hand, to include them in the reconstruction of traditional Tai religion.

#### c) *The range of victims*

Domestic animals are foremost amongst those chosen to be presented to the gods. This is to be fully expected of a farming people, for their livestock is easily and readily available. Also many domestic animals form part of the diet of these peoples. After the spirits have accepted their presents, all the fruits, the rice, the alcohol, the sweets and the meats are consumed by those who have come to celebrate the ritual.

The Tai peoples appear to be quite consistent in what they regard as suitable gifts for the unseen powers. During family rituals one or more fowls, or a duck is a proper present. A communal sacrifice requires at least a pig. A buffalo is regarded amongst all Tai to be the gift which is most pleasing to the great gods. During a large community offer, when a differentiation is made between various recipients it is found that the great heavenly powers share one or more buffaloes, and various other categories of powers obtain goats, pigs, dogs, ducks, pigeons and fowls. The range of animals considered suitable for sacrifice was even further extended in two instances, namely in the Ahom account of elephant lore and elephant diseases, where brown swans, a cobra, deer, fish, rats, frogs and earthworms are mentioned, and in the Siamese hunting lore in which blue crabs, horse-shoe crabs and a bamboo rat are listed. These types of sacrificial prescriptions must be regarded as belonging to a very specialised professional ritual. They do not appear to be shared by the general populace.

Dog sacrifices occupy a special position in Tai ritual and they deserve further attention. In the ethnographic overview there were seven separate occasions on which dogs were killed, and to these seven an eighth can be

still added. The Ahom give white dogs in the "earth" section of *uum phra*, and, on a different occasion, during the former state ceremony for Lai Lung Kham, a power closely connected with disease, they killed a red dog. The third case occurs amongst the Phakey, who sacrificed and ate a red dog in case there was an epidemic which showed no signs of abating. The fourth are the Nua, who throw a dog into the fire which threatens to consume their village. The fifth is a red dog offer by the Lao for Grandfather Muet. One of the spirits in the Neua pantheon is provided with a dog during the great annual sacrifice. The Chuang kill a dog at an oath-taking sacrifice. Finally, amongst the Red Tai healing rituals there is the killing of a dog for Phii Khong, who is asked to intervene with the evil disease-causing spirits on behalf of the patient.<sup>77</sup> From all these separate cases it appears that there is a widespread pattern which may go back to Ancient Tai tradition. This concerns the relation between a dog sacrifice and the warding off of threats.

On one of the occasions when a colour is prescribed the white colour is considered best, but in four cases this colour is specified as red. It is possible that the preference for red reflects simply the fact that Southeast Asian dogs often have a reddish coat and that in traditional Tai villages, finding a black or a white dog might prove rather difficult. On the other hand it is also possible that this red colour is, in some oblique fashion, related to the fact that a dog sacrifice is ritually known in Laos as the sacrifice of a "golden deer". Also amongst the Yuan there is an ancient mythical connection between dog and "golden deer".<sup>78</sup> The theme of the red dog cannot be further pursued with the limited amount of information at hand and it will be taken up again after the information from surrounding cultures has been surveyed.

#### d) *Divination techniques*

A variety of divination practices have been encountered when studying the link between the communal sacrifices and the beginning of the rainy season. Some of these practices have been encountered for Tai groups which have not recently been in contact, though the geographical spread is not as wide as to strongly suggest an Ancient Tai custom. These are the custom of examining the animal's liver for any tears or discolouration which may bode ill (Ahom, Khamyang and Laotians) and the examination of the position of a fowl's tongue bone (Ahom, Siamese, Tai of northeast Thailand and Laotians). Another intriguing combination is the account of fowls' thigh bone divination amongst the Ahom and the report on a similar custom for the Chuang.

Less widespread are the reports on taking the direction in which a sacrificial animal falls or the direction of the blood flow as indicative of how the coming season will be (Lue and Laotians). Similarly, the number of grains which remain on an egg (Neua and Red Tai) have only been found thus far for peoples who have had opportunity to borrow and learn from each other. Other divination practices, such as seeing whether the yolk is visible through the egg white (Tai of northeast Thailand), the pouring of water over a holy stone (Lao), the dipping of swords in water (Lao) and the

<sup>77</sup> R. Robert, *Notes sur les Tay Dông*, p. 71.

<sup>78</sup> C. Notton, *Annales du Siam*, Volume I, pp. 3-10.

examination of a fowl's foot (Red Tai), represent but single instances and until corresponding accounts are found for a range of other Tai peoples it may be supposed that they represent either local developments, or possibly relatively recent borrowings with a neighbouring culture.

e) *Oaths of allegiance*

An interesting side-issue which emerged from the ethnographic survey is the description of some oath-taking rituals. Ahom chiefs dipped their swords in chicken's blood and drank some of it whilst swearing a truce with a neighbouring tribe. The Yuan king swearing allegiance drank buffalo blood, mixed with alcohol. The Red Tai who makes a formal oath may have to drink chicken's blood mixed with alcohol. The Chuang drink alcohol and eat meat on such occasions. In most of these instances there seems sufficient similarity to recognise a shared tradition. Since the geographical spread of the reported customs is extremely wide, it may well offer itself for inclusion in the Ancient Tai tradition. A further study of this material, considering details, such as the actual texts of the oaths may throw further light on this matter. In that case it would be interesting to include the Siamese custom of swearing oaths, reported in some of the earlier inscriptions, as well as the custom of the bi-annual drinking of the water of the "oath of allegiance" which was regularly performed in Siam until the nineteenth century.<sup>79</sup> The fact that the court insisted that water be drunk on such an occasion may possibly be related to an Ancient Tai custom of drinking blood and alcohol.

In this chapter various aspects of a common cultural tradition which appears to go back to the time when the Tai had a more homogeneous culture have been established. This does not mean that such aspects must be regarded as uniquely Tai. This may or may not be the case. Before an opinion may be ventured on whether the Tai share some of their Ancient Tai traditions with other people the ethnographic survey must be extended to include the main surrounding cultures. This is the subject of the following chapter.

<sup>79</sup> H. G. Q. Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function*, London: B. Quaritch, 1931, pp. 193-98.



## TAI SACRIFICES IN WIDER PERSPECTIVE

The study of sacrificial traditions of all the peoples who surround the Tai, and with whom they may have interacted at various periods in history, is an immense task. The Tai are spread widely, from Assam to northern Vietnam and from southern China to southern Thailand. The cultural traditions, with which at least some of the Tai groups have been in contact, cover scores of ethnic groups in Assam, in Burma, in southern China, in northern Thailand, in Laos, in Vietnam and in Cambodia. To give an adequate and fairly complete overview of sacrificial rituals in all these surrounding cultures would involve checking sources in scores of languages and take years of research in each of the countries mentioned above. All that can be done in the present limited time and with the finite resources available is the scanning of accessible literature and the collecting of information regarding the general types of sacrifices common in the various traditions, as well as noting interesting ritual details which may provide clues as to whether or not Tai customs are related. In this overview of ethnographic literature occasionally valuable descriptions of sacrifices were encountered which have not been incorporated in this volume. Usually these related to local healing rituals or death ceremonies and they were excluded on the grounds that they were not directly relevant to the main themes of this part of the book. In general, the following account has been guided by the Tai sacrificial customs which have been already established above. For the various surrounding cultures, note is taken of which animals are killed, which rules are observed during the communal sacrifices, and what divination techniques have been reported. In accordance with the pattern set in Volume I, the survey begins in the west and ends in Cambodia.

### a) Assamese lowland peoples

Assamese cultural history is extremely complex. Many different peoples have entered the Brahmaputra Valley and interacted with the cultural groups preceding them. In the lowlands especially, the mixing of a variety of indigenous traditions with various forms of Hinduism has occurred to such an extent that it is difficult to discern the separate strands of beliefs. The Miri, Dophla, Boro, Mlech, Koch, Dimasa, Garo and Chutiya cultures are some of the important local groupings, but only a few of these have been described in some detail. The situation in the hills is somewhat different. There many traditions appear to have been able to maintain to a much larger extent their own specific character. Therefore the intricate Assamese scene will be dealt with by first noting sacrificial customs in the lowlands, and then moving to the hills.

Apart from the Chutiya human sacrifices in honour of Pisha-si, which have been mentioned in some detail in Chapter 3, there is an account of a ritual human decapitation at Dhunsiri, in what used to be Koch territory. There were two rows of thirty round pillars and two rows of square ones.

Each pillar is supposed to have been the appointed seat of a grandee according to his rank. It is said that every year, on a fixed day, all

the nobles assembled in the hall of audience, and a human being was decapitated between two square pillars in the centre of the hall before the assembly, as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of the Deity.<sup>1</sup>

No other information on this remarkable meeting of nobles has been found. Neither the shape of the pillars, nor the decorations, as they can be found in the illustration in Butler's book, seem to bear a relationship with Tai culture.

Sacrifices accompany all Garo ceremonies. These comprise rituals for the welfare of the community as well as for its protection from danger and calamities, annually recurring ceremonies, healing practices, life-cycle, and agricultural rituals. The animals specified as sacrificial animals are goats and fowls.<sup>2</sup> Such information brings this study no further than providing the insight that at least some lowland Assamese peoples other than the Tai had a strongly developed sacrificial tradition, and that the Ahom, when they first settled in the Brahmaputra Valley, might not have felt themselves strikingly different in this respect.

Probably more important for the cultural historian is the possible influence of Hindu customs upon the westernmost Tai, for, after all, most Ahom eventually adopted the Hindu faith and Hindu ritual. There are several branches of Hinduism in which sacrifices are important. Buffaloes, pigs, goats and cocks may be offered to some of the deities reputedly fond of freshly killed flesh. All gifts offered to these bloodthirsty powers ought to be stained with blood; rice offered to them must be dyed with blood, flowers presented to them must be red.<sup>3</sup>

In general, however, the rituals of most Hindus are free of blood sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> Brahmin priests are forbidden to kill, unless participating in one of the rare *yagnam* sacrifices. Only four types of victims may be offered according to texts which go back a considerable time, namely horse, cow, elephant and man.<sup>5</sup> Of these, the horse sacrifice has been most often described. The victim must be in his prime, perfectly proportioned, and of an even hue.<sup>6</sup> If it concerns a human offering, the victim must also be free of crime. In one description of a *yagnam* sacrifice, it can be read how a ram is brought unto the assembled priests. It is rubbed with oil, bound, and decorated with garlands. *Mantras* are muttered constantly; these are intended to kill the sacrificial animal. This process is also helped along by beating and suffocating the victim, from whose throat no sound ought to escape. When death has ensued, the entrails are removed and roasted over a fire. The rest is skinned and hacked into pieces. One portion is given to the fire, others

<sup>1</sup> J. Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam During a Residence of Fourteen Years*, Delhi: Vivek Publishing Company, 1978, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> B. Pugh, "The Garos", *Tribes of Assam* (edited by S. Barkakati), New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1960, pp. 27-28.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 645.

<sup>4</sup> W. Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Westminster: Constable, 1896, Volume II, p. 312. Crooke mentions that cow sacrifices were common until they were prohibited by the Hindus.

<sup>5</sup> There are some accounts of human sacrifice other than *yagnam*. In a type of gruesome alchemy, accounts of which are also related in Upper Assam, the first-born son's blood ought to be used in a ceremony reputedly bringing spectacular wealth and power to the sacrificer. This has actually been tried, see *The Indian Antiquary*, Volume II, 1873, pp. 125-26.

<sup>6</sup> Dubois (p. 511) mentions that the horse must be perfectly white, but his editor thinks Dubois is mistaken and it should be black.

fried in butter and divided amongst the chief priest and the person who pays for the ceremony. These two divide and distribute the pieces of meat over the crowd of spectators.<sup>7</sup> Human sacrifices reputedly took place by beheading; the head was hung up as a trophy for the bloodthirsty deity.

From these details it becomes apparent that some of the Ahom ideosyncracies, such as an Ahom priest's use of a *mantra* to kill a fowl, or the practice of beating and suffocating animals in the "front section" of the *uum phra* ceremony, may well represent Hindu influence. Essentially, both those Ahom rituals have retained their Tai character, however.

#### b) Assamese hill peoples

A strong sacrificial tradition has been reported for the Khasi people. In the first place, some Khasi regularly performed ritual killing of humans. Some of these apparently were under the influence of Tantric beliefs and practices, such as the sacrifices at Jaitiapur, where each autumn humans were killed and thrown in the river for the Kupli goddess, and at Nartiang, where a severed head was thrown down into an underground cave.<sup>8</sup> There is also a well-described tradition of killing humans for the *thlen*, a water demon living in a cave. *Thlen* worship reputedly is passed on in certain families and the offering of blood to the *thlen* involves extensive (as yet undescribed) rituals. If the *thlen* does not obtain its regular sustenance in the form of human blood, it will manifest itself, usually as a snake. Failing human blood, *thlen* worship involves plucking some hair, or cloth, from a victim and, with the help of sorcery, the victim will lose weight, grow sick, and finally die. Apparently this is a type of organised witchcraft. Annually the *thlen's* food (*siad tang snem*) is prepared in an elaborate ceremony, but the sequence of events, objects used and other ritual details have not yet been described.<sup>9</sup>

Of the Khasi animal sacrifices, that of the male goat is the most important. Great numbers of them are killed during state ceremonies, such as a coronation, the previous king's cremation, the regularly recurring rituals to ensure the state's prosperity and protection, and also during family rituals. The cock is the other animal regularly killed. During a coronation, for example, thirteen he-goats are offered, twelve for the twelve main clans and one for the new leader himself. During their preparation the goats have their horns decorated with silver casing. The sacrificing is done with a knife, which has first been dipped in rice, probably in a wish to diminish the threatening character of the tip of the weapon.<sup>10</sup> The actual killing is performed in total silence, underlining the solemnity of the moment.<sup>11</sup> At other times during the ritual drums are beaten, pipes are played and guns are discharged. During the rituals for protecting the state goats are killed on a platform which has been pasted with red soil.

An important ritual element in Khasi sacrificial customs is the Khasi oak, of which the branches and leaves are often used. There are yearly

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 510 ff. Cosmo Publications, 1975, pp. 98-104.

<sup>8</sup> B. Pugh, "Khasi", *Tribes of Assam*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> H. Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, pp. 356-7.

<sup>10</sup> P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, Delhi; <sup>11</sup> H. Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, pp. 262-63.

goat and cock sacrifices for the god of the state, the god of water, village tutelary spirits and ancestors. Furthermore, before the fishing season may be started, altars are set up in the river bed

...in the midst of which a bough of the Khasi oak (*dieng sming*) was planted. The goats were then decapitated, it being considered an essential that the head should be severed with one blow. As soon as the head was cut off there was a rush on the part of the sacrificers to see in which direction the head faced. South or east was considered a good omen, north or west was bad.<sup>12</sup>

These and other ritual details demonstrate clearly that there is considerable divergence between the sacrificial customs that have been established for the Tai and those of the Khasi. Although, in general, they share the custom of needing a blood offering to accompany most formal contacts with the gods, the Khasi use a different range of animals, they make use of a different type of altar, and other details are also at variance with what can be expected amongst Tai peoples. The Tai do not need flat table stones to offer to their ancestors, they do not use branches and leaves of the "Khasi oak", or any comparable tree, they do not decorate the horns of sacrificial animals.<sup>13</sup>

How divergent the two ritual traditions are is also evident in the details of divination. Both among the Tai and the Khasi divination is often used to find out which spirit must be propitiated or whether a particular spirit has actually agreed to accept an offering. Also both groups use fowls and eggs in divination. However, these are but superficial similarities; in the details the traditions are dissimilar. In the Tai tradition, a fowl's tongue bone, thigh bone or foot are important, and an egg may be studied to see whether the yolk shines through, or how many grains of rice can lay on top. The Khasi, on the other hand, do not look for such details. They examine the fowl's large intestines which have two pea-like protuberances. Immediately after the bird is killed, its bowels are extracted and a few grains of rice distributed over them. The last convulsive movements are then watched intently in order to see if certain portions come closer to each other, or whether they move further apart with respect to the two aforementioned protuberances. These movements are seen as a communication by the spirit with whom contact has been established.

Among the Khasi egg divination has developed to a fine art. The egg is smeared with red earth and forcefully hurled on to a divination board. The egg's contents and pieces of shell will be scattered over the flat piece of wood. Skilful men can read omens from the actual distribution of the pieces.<sup>14</sup> Another method of egg divination consists of the pressing of two eggs together and noticing if the one chosen for divination breaks more easily than the other one. If the other one breaks, the omen is bad. Another common method of divination is the holding of a lime-case on a chain in the air, or a bow held up by the middle of the string whilst asking a question. If the lime case begins to swing, or the bow begins to turn, the answer must

<sup>12</sup> P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, pp. 114-15.

<sup>13</sup> After writing this book it was brought to my attention that the Lao of Ban Ko'n near Vientiane did decorate the horns of two buffalos (Archaimbault, personal communication, December 1980).

<sup>14</sup> C. Becker, "Das Eierwerfen der Khasi", *Anthropos*, Volume XII-XIII, 1917-1918, pp. 494-96, and Gurdon, *The Khasis*, pp. 118-20. The Dophla are reported to use a similar method. See W. Robinson, "Notes on the Dophlas", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Volume XX, p. 126 ff.

be interpreted as affirmative. If no movement occurs after asking the question, the answer is negative.<sup>18</sup> These comprise the most commonly used methods of divination. Amongst the less prominent methods there are some which they have in common with the Tai, such as the reading of the state of the animal's liver and the counting of the number of grains of rice, picked up randomly from a bag.

These sacrificial and divination rituals have been described in some detail, because they provide an example of how specific ritual details may provide clues as to whether or not there has been borrowing or a good measure of contact between two different ethnic groups. Although both Tai and Khasi peoples have intimate links with early Southeast Asian history, an examination of their ritual traditions would point at no contact between them. Divination techniques, possibly a cultural feature which passes easier from one people to another, and which may be a less rough measuring guide, indicate some correspondences, but not to such a degree so as to suggest intimate contact.

Other hill people of Assam, with whom recently at least some of the Tai have had contact, as was noted above, are the groups known as Naga. The Naga have a strong sacrificial tradition, comprising both human and animal offerings. The Naga head-hunting techniques appear to have nothing in common with Tai traditions.<sup>19</sup> Amongst the Tangkhul Naga the most appropriate animals for ceremonial slaughter are the buffalo, the mithun and the bull, in that order. Pigs, dogs and fowl are killed alongside, but these are "not counted for anything". Given a buffalo sacrifice, these automatically follow.<sup>20</sup> The available ethnographies describe sacrifices only in the most general terms and it is difficult to learn more than facts such as that offerings of food and fermented rice to the ancestors' spirits are needed to ensure a plentiful crop,<sup>21</sup> or that there is a never-ending series of sacrifices of animals like pigs, fowls and goats at the time of epidemics.<sup>19</sup>

More details are available for the divination rituals. In order to find out at what villages good rains may be expected, the diviner places a raw egg, which has its top sliced off, on a thick layer of chaff. The chaff is set alight and the fire causes the egg's contents to boil over. The direction of the flow of boiling egg-white and the amount which remains in the shell are examined and interpreted.<sup>22</sup> Medicine men amongst the Ao Naga stare into a bamboo cup containing rice-wine or water for clues regarding the future. They also may tear a particular type of leaf down the middle and observe the position of the torn fibres. A piece of ginger may be broken and the patterns on the fractured surface used to tell the future.<sup>23</sup> Chang

<sup>18</sup> P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, pp. 118-20. A somewhat similar method, using a ball of rice on a string has been described for the Tai in northern Thailand by R. Le May, *An Asian Arcady*, Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1926, pp. 104-5.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, G. E. R. Grant Brown, "Human Sacrifices near the Upper Chindwin", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Volume I, Pt. 1, 1911, pp. 35-40.

<sup>20</sup> M. Hiram, *Social and Cultural Life of the Nagas (The Tangkhul Nagas)*, Delhi:

B.R. Publishing, 1977, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, London: Macmillan, 1926, p. 288.

<sup>22</sup> R. Thamliri, "Zemi Nagas", *Tribes of Assam*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>23</sup> M. Hiram, *Social and Cultural Life of the Nagas*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>24</sup> This is also found amongst the Zemi Naga. For details see U. Graham Bower, *Naga Path*, London: John Murray, 1950, p. 137.



and Lhota people cut chips from a stick and interpret the pattern of fallen pieces. Ao Naga very commonly cut a chicken's throat and open the abdominal cavity. The point where the intestines branch into two, their fullness or emptiness, as well as the absence or presence of blood are carefully noted. Another common method is to pull a fire-thong to and fro whilst asking the gods a specific question. The question is repeated until the stick chars through. The resulting two charred ends are then examined for signs.<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy that none of these methods has been encountered in Tai divination.

On the other hand, there is an interesting parallel between the Naga tug-of-war and that observed amongst some Tai groups. The Tangkhul Naga celebrate as part of their eleven-day agricultural festival in February a ritual rope-pulling during which two teams of women are engaged. Older, married women are on one side, and young women must be on the other. Sometimes the contest is between women of two clans.<sup>23</sup> The fact that both Naga and Tai have the ritual tug-of-war demonstrates some point of contact, but this need not necessarily be a direct cultural contact at some stage of these two peoples' histories. In the first place, the details diverge considerably between the two peoples. Secondly, tugs-of-war in connection with rain and agriculture are reported for many other peoples in Southeast Asia. They are found as far south as Indonesia, and as far north as the island of Okinawa in southern Japan.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Tai and Naga know a form of the ritual may be interpreted only as a sign of early links with other Southeast Asian cultures.<sup>25</sup>

### c) The Kachin

An interesting set of customs have been described for the Kachin, amongst whom blood sacrifices are performed at every important ceremony. Human sacrifices have not been reported for this ethnic group.<sup>26</sup> Usually buffaloes, pigs and fowls are selected for ritual slaughter, and the number varies according to the importance of the occasion. After the ceremony the sacrificial meat is commonly shared between the priest and the members of the households on whose behalf the ritual takes place.<sup>27</sup> The great majority of Kachin spirits are considered to be particularly fond of blood and meat and in nearly every ceremony some parts of the sacrificial animal are cooked separately and dedicated, along with other gifts such as a container of alcoholic beverage, in the name of the spirit that has been addressed. There is a rule that the priest and the person on whose behalf the ritual is held are not allowed to do the actual killing; for this task another person, usually an elderly paternal relative of the householder, is engaged. Women are

<sup>22</sup> J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, pp. 294-95.

<sup>23</sup> M. Horam, *Social and Cultural Life of the Nagas*, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> See the photograph in H. A. Diefenderfer, "Okinawa, the Island Rebuilt", *The National Geographic Magazine*, Volume CVII, Nr. 2, p. 280.

<sup>25</sup> Further details on Naga customs can be found in T. C. Hodson, *The Naga Tribes*

of Manipur, Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1974 and J. H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

<sup>26</sup> H. J. Wehrli, *Beitrag zur Ethnologie der Chingpaw (Kachin) von Ober-Burma*, Leiden: Brill, 1904, pp. 54-55.

<sup>27</sup> T. K. M. Baruah, *The Singphos and Their Religion*, Shillong: Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1977, p. 96.

not allowed to do the killing, neither are they allowed to cook and prepare the sacrificial meat. Women are not prevented, however, from sharing in the food afterwards. Skulls of sacrificed animals are hung at the house's entrance posts. Great quantities of rice-wine are consumed during the rituals. Ginger features as an important ritual ingredient.

At one agricultural ceremony a bamboo pole is strapped to a part of the house, bent over, and a sacrificial chicken, wrapped in leaves, is attached to the end of the pole. The pole is restrained from resuming its upright position by a cord. At the right time the priest cuts the strap and thereby causes the food parcel to be hurled in the nearby shrub.<sup>28</sup> More common ways of presenting sacrificed animals are by placing them on altars. The Kachin have three main types of altars, the *ngadang*, the *khinri* and the *khinram*. A *ngadang* consists of two tall branches, cut from a particular tree and planted in the earth with the leaves still attached at some distance to each other. Then they are tied together so as to cross each other. A long piece of bamboo, of which both ends have been shaped to look like funnels, is horizontally attached to both branches. The sacrificial animal is dedicated under this altar. The *khinri* is made of four posts upholding two platforms, one above the other, each platform some three feet square. The *khinram* is shaped somewhat like a *khinri*, but its posts are closer together and it supports only a single platform.

With regard to divination practices, the most common method consists of preparing a piece of bamboo in such a manner that it ends on both sides in a sealed knot, and placing this in an open fire. Soon the bamboo will burst and immediately afterwards it is taken out of the flames for examination. If the piece has split lengthwise, it is considered favourable. Often the split edges show intricate patterns of threadlike fibres. These can only be read and interpreted by experienced men. Another common method of divination is to take a large leaf and to begin tearing it in narrow strips. During the tearing sacrificial animals may be enumerated in a fixed order. The animal mentioned when the last strip has been reached is the one selected by a spirit as an appropriate gift under the particular circumstances. The resulting heap of strips of leaf can then be counted and if the total number is uneven, it is regarded as a good omen.<sup>29</sup> Apart from these methods, the priest may also consult the intestines of sacrificed animals, as well as their brains and tendons.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst these divination practices form a set, different from those encountered amongst Tai peoples, the Kachin and the Tai share one specific type of divination in their house building customs. The Kachin who wants to test whether or not a site is suitable for a new house may dig a small trench and place in it a bamboo container with three grains of rice. The

<sup>28</sup> The only other place where I have encountered pieces of bamboo bent over and tied with a strap, for ritual purpose, is in the Khamyang decoration of their *kong mu*, drawn in Figure 4 of Volume I. It is a possibility that the two are somehow connected, for there has been considerable contact between Kachin and some Shan peoples. It would follow that the *kong mu* decoration stands for a gift being hurled to

the appropriate spirits.

<sup>29</sup> Telford, "Animism in Kengtung State", p. 154; Barua, *The Singphos and Their Religion*, pp. 117-18. O. Hanson, *The Kachins, Their Customs and Traditions*, Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1913, pp. 137-38.

<sup>30</sup> Wehrli, *Beitrag zur Ethnologie der Chingpaw*, p. 57.

bamboo is covered and left there during the night. The next morning the contents are examined and if the grain has not been disturbed it is regarded as a favourable sign.<sup>31</sup>

When there is an epidemic, the spirits owning the region, including those of the mountains, must be propitiated. These spirits like to be presented with white-coloured sacrifices, such as a white buffalo or a white fowl and the priest must be dressed in white. The sacrifice for warding off an epidemic is held outside the village. All participants spend the night there. The next morning they perform the ritual killing, taking care to avoid loud noises, for these spirits apparently take offence at any sign which may be interpreted as a sign of merriness. The priest then goes into a state of trance and communicates with "the owners of the region", asking them to take the disease away.<sup>32</sup>

In general, the Kachin rituals seem to have little in common with those of the Tai. The few elements and details which they share fit in with the view that the contacts between these ethnic groups must be of a relatively recent date.<sup>33</sup>

#### d) The Chin

Chin people sacrifice mithuns on major occasions, and pigs as well as fowls are slaughtered at all ceremonies.<sup>34</sup> All animals to be sacrificed must spend the night before the offering takes place in the pens of the house of sacrifice.<sup>35</sup> Great care is taken with regard to the carving and the dividing of the animals, which has to be done by a man who is thoroughly familiar with the many intricate rules. The Chin village has communal shrines in the fields, at which sacrifices are given for the opening of the land, once every three, six or nine years. This is connected with the fact that these peoples depend upon an upland rotational agricultural system. The field shrines are also used just before the cattle are allowed to graze. In addition there is a village sacrificial precinct, which is situated in the village itself. This precinct is usually marked by several sacrificial stones on the ground. At the village shrine there is a banyan tree, which has been planted usually by the settlement's founder.<sup>36</sup> Skulls of sacrificed animals are often hung on the verandah. Another typical Chin aspect of sacrificial ritual is the display of racks of sacrificial posts and forked trees.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst all these sacrificial details are evidently not related to the tradition described for the Tai, it is interesting to note that the Chin sacrifice a dog (of any sex or colour), in order to ward off evil spirits in the fields. Also a dog may be sacrificed in order to protect a person against sorcery.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Baruah, *The Singphos and Their Religion*, p. 27. The corresponding Tai belief is described in B. J. Terwiel, "Leasing from the Gods (Thailand)", *Anthropos*, Volume 71, 1976, pp. 262-63.

<sup>32</sup> Baruah, *The Singphos and Their Religion*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>33</sup> Lebar (et al.), *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> H. N. C. Stevenson, *The Economics of*

*the Central Chin Tribes*, Bombay: The Times of India Press, 1943, p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> F. K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society, a Tribal People of Burma Adapted to a Non-Western Civilization*, Illinois Studies in Anthropology No. 3, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963, p. 176.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> Stevenson, *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes*, p. 34.

## e) The Akha

In the ethnographic literature the general principles of Akha chicken, pig, goat, and buffalo sacrifice can be found. The priest kills a buffalo with a type of lance, a stick which has been provided with a metal point. He forces the stick into the animal's body at the spine and tries to pierce the liver or the spleen.<sup>39</sup> The customs of the Burmese Akha reputedly have been heavily influenced by those of the Tai Shan. Thus, their regular offering to the "lords and rulers of land and water" is borrowed from the Shan.<sup>40</sup> The cultural contacts between the Burmese Akha and some of the Tai may also account for the fact that many of their divination techniques coincide. Thus, if these Akha wish to determine whether or not a site may be used for building, an egg is thrown in the air. If the egg breaks it is a good sign. This custom has been established to have formed part of the reconstructed Ancient Tai culture in Volume I of *The Tai of Assam*. The Akha examine a sacrificed animal's liver, and an egg's yolk for tell-tale signs. Especially noteworthy is the fact that they use chicken's thigh bones for divination. A sacrificed fowl is cooked, its thigh bones cleaned and studied. In a hole towards the end of the bone a splinter of bamboo is inserted and the angle and the alignment between bamboo and bone is used to read the future.<sup>41</sup> The Akha of northern Laos apparently do not know this latter divination technique, because Roux, who has reported on this particular method for the P'u Noi (see below), would have included it in his account. Both the Laotian and Burmese Akha make use of bamboo star-shaped interdiction signs, which they call *da leh* or *da leng*. All Akha groups sacrifice dogs. Often the dog's carcass is hung over village entrance gates in order to frighten away evil spirits.<sup>42</sup>

## f) The P'u Noi

The P'u Noi, who live in upper Laos, have been strongly influenced by Tai culture. This is clear, for example, when their terms in the field of religion and mythology are studied. Most of these are Tai words. The P'u Noi kill a pig every year before they prepare the fields. This sacrifice takes place at an altar which is situated at the northern end of the village. They make use of the *talaeo* symbol.

Their communal sacrifice for the guardian spirit of the land takes place in the seventh month (probably June). The village chief leads notables and others to the altar outside the village, which is shaped like a "camp-bed". Here are deposited two sabres, one gun, one pot with cooked rice, two pots with uncooked rice, one bowl of paddy, dried areca nuts, a length of white

<sup>39</sup> H. Roux, "Deux tribus de la région de Phongsaly (Laos septentrional)", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 24, 1924, p. 404.

<sup>40</sup> P. W. Lewis, *Ethnographic Notes on the Akhas of Burma*, New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1960, pp. 256-57.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>42</sup> Roux, "Deux tribus de la région de Phongsaly", p. 404 and p. 428; G. Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*,

Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1962, p. 2; Boon Chuey Srisavasdi (editor), *The Hill Tribes of Siam*, Bangkok: Khun Aroon, 1963, p. 21; A. R. Walker (editor), *Farmers in the Hills, Ethnographic Notes on the Upland Peoples of North Thailand*, The School of Comparative Social Science, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1975, opposite p. 183. In the latter source note also the bamboo *da leh*.

cloth and one of red cloth, as well as five pairs of candles. A pig and a fowl are killed and the spirits are addressed thus:<sup>43</sup>

Spirit of the country, spirits of the mountains, spirits of the rocks, we invite you to accept this pig and this fowl which we have offered. Please give us your protection, make the coming season a lucky one, increase our prosperity and keep disease away from us.

The most common P'u Noi divination technique consists of the examination of fowl's thigh bones, in the small holes of which they insert sticks. Two thigh bones, together with their wooden pins, form patterns which are scanned. Roux has collected twelve combinations and their interpretations. From these it seems that if the two bones and their pins form exact mirror images, the sign is neither good nor bad. If two sticks fan out on the left bone, whilst a single stick points downward on the right, it is a good omen. If the single pin forms a right angle with the bone, the sign is bad.<sup>44</sup>

#### g) The Karen, the Lawa, the Lahu and the Khmu

It is quite clear from the ethnographic literature that these peoples have all rich sacrificial traditions, with pig, fowl, and sometimes buffalo offerings.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately there are no reports which provide us with the ritual rules and regulations and in this section a collection of somewhat disparate snippets of interesting information is presented.

For the Karen there exists a report that they sacrifice a dog in order to propitiate the spirits and that they hang the dead animal to putrify. A witness reports that "the air for a hundred yards was reeking with the stench from the crucified remains."<sup>46</sup> The detailed account of a Lahu ceremony reveals that the customs as related to sacrifices appear quite divergent from those of the Tai. Thus the Tai have never been reported to place pine needles on their altars, the Tai do not use square altar stones, and neither do they dance around a "tree" which has been set up in the middle of the village. Also the method of killing described, a clubbing, is not the usual practice of the Tai, who consider it important to have the bloodflow in the vicinity of the altar.<sup>47</sup> One aspect which is shared by most of the peoples discussed in this section is the bamboo interdiction sign. The Lahu call it *leh-o*<sup>48</sup>, the Karen also use the object, but thus far its name has not been encountered<sup>49</sup>, the Khmu know it under the name *ta-le*.<sup>50</sup>

Divination techniques provide again an interesting field for comparison. Amongst the Lahu the most commonly used divination consists of taking

<sup>43</sup> Roux, "Deux tribus de la region de Phongsaly", p. 481.

<sup>44</sup> For further details, see the illustrations, *ibid.*, p. 479.

<sup>45</sup> H. I. Marshall, *The Karens of Burma*, Burma Pamphlets No. 8, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1945, pp. 12-13; G. Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*, p. 11 and p. 70; E. W. Hutchinson, "The Lawa in Northern Siam", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XXVII, Pt. 2, 1935, p. 159; E. J. Walton, "The Yang Kalo (Karieng) or White Karens", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XVI, Pt. 1, 1922, p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> H. S. Hallett, *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States*, Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1890, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> A. R. Walker, "The La Hu Nyi (Red La Hu) New Year Celebrations", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume LVIII, Pt. 1, 1970, p. 639.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Plate 22.

<sup>49</sup> J. P. Andersen, "Some Notes about the Karen in Siam", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XVIII, Pt. 2, 1923, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> H. Roux and Tran-Van-Chu, "Les Tsa Khmu", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 27, 1927, p. 202.



a pair of chicken thigh bones and sticking wooden pins in the small holes. The resulting figure is assessed on its shape. If, for example, two pins jut out in the manner of spread-out wings, it is a good omen. If only a single hole can be found it is regarded as a bad sign. Two holes are considered good. If the pins fit firmly, it is auspicious; if they are wobbly, it bodes ill. Other Lahu divination methods consist of examining a fowl's skull. If the membrane in the middle is transparent it is a good sign, a black streak lengthwise is also a good omen, but if a black streak runs cross-wise, bad times may be expected. Apart from this, the diviner may also open the fowl's beak and examine the way the tongue bone sticks up.<sup>51</sup>

Common methods of divination amongst the Khmu are for example, the random taking of a pinch of rice. Whilst taking the grain it must be declared whether an even or an uneven number is wished. If the declaration is found to correspond with what is actually found between the fingers, this is taken to mean that the required spirit has made contact. A second successful prediction is needed for confirmation. Another method is the careful examination of an egg yolk, whereby special attention is given to the occurrence of red spots or streaks. Fowl's feet are examined for the position of the toes and the animal's tongue bone ought to be straight before it indicates a good omen. The chicken's eyes are checked and two white lines inside its nostrils are observed. Finally a chicken's cranium is scrutinised in order to see whether it is evenly white. If any blood streaks are found, some bad luck lies ahead.<sup>52</sup>

#### **h) The Hmong**

The Hmong, mountain dwellers whose homeland appears to lie in southern China, also have a sacrificial religion. Sometimes they offer buffaloes and oxen, but more commonly they choose pigs and fowls. Many of the sacrifices which have been described in detail concern healing rituals, but fortunately there is also some information on rituals more closely connected with those central in this study.

The Hmong celebrate an elaborate three-day New Year festival, which is held during the dark phase of the moon in December, after the harvest has been reaped. For three days all work stops. In each household chickens are sacrificed for the souls of the living and for the ancestors. A cock is sacrificed for the house spirit and its blood is daubed on a piece of paper. Chickens are also given to the spirit of the drum and to the healing powers. Apart from these household rituals, the New Year festival is also the occasion for killing a pig to Tiertee Tier Seng, the community's guardian spirit. This pig is paid for with contributions from all households. The ceremony takes place at a grove outside the actual village. Various powers, such as those of the earth, the forest, the streams and the mountains are invoked. The pig is slaughtered, cooked and parts of it, together with a little rice, are offered to these spirits.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Telford, "Animism in Kengtung State", pp. 151-2.

<sup>52</sup> Further details can be found in Roux and Tran-Van-Chu, "Les Tsa Khmu", pp. 182-85.

<sup>53</sup> Nusit Chindarsi, *The Religion of the*

*Hmong Njua*, Bangkok: The Slam Society, 1976, p. 135. Later Nusit states that no community sacrifice takes place, but apparently this refers to the abnormal situation in the particular village which was the focus of research (pp. 135-39).

Amongst the Hmong Njua, once every three years a pig is sacrificed for the spirit of the central pole of the household. The killing takes place during the night. Women are excluded from attending the ritual, because a clan secret is involved and women, reputedly, are unable to keep such secrets. The pig's blood is boiled and the animal's jaw is hung from the pole, where it will remain until a new pig is offered.

Every seven or thirteen years the White Hmong of central Kweichow hold a large buffalo sacrifice for the ancestors. During the preceding night the drums are beaten and the ancestors have been invited to attend. Near the house a brand-new sacrificial post is erected, next to the row of similar posts which have been left standing from former sacrifices. Just before noon the buffalo is led out and tied to the post. Paddy is poured over the animal. An iron nail is held against the victim's forehead and a forceful blow is struck against this nail, rendering the animal unconscious. Then a stab is made into its throat and its blood is collected in containers. The buffalo is divided up and distributed, according to a fixed order, amongst the priest and the other participants. The head is placed on top of the pole, where it remains until nightfall. Other posts, described as posts with "crescent-shaped tops", are erected at some distance from the village, one post for each animal killed.<sup>54</sup>

The Hmong believe that certain evil spirits are particularly afraid of a dog's spirit. Therefore they practise the dog sacrifice. The type of dog best suited for sacrifice is a breed which has a red coat, which can be bought from another tribe.<sup>55</sup> When an epidemic threatens the village such a dog is pulled on a leash from house to house, and then it is killed by a stab in the neck. The blood is collected and some of it is daubed on the back of the people. Certain cords, fashioned from grass, in which wooden knives have been stuck, are also painted with this substance. These cords are strung over the roads leading to the village. The dog's head is impaled at the main entrance road. Some clans reputedly eat the dog's meat to obtain protection against the threat.

Whilst the sacrifice in honour of Tiertee Tier Seng and also those during which a red dog is killed show some parallels with the customs which have been described amongst the Tai peoples, even more striking similarities are found in the description of divination techniques. Much divination takes place through throwing two pieces of bamboo, each one about four to five inches long and possessing one flat and one rounded side. When the priest makes contact with the spirits he may keep throwing until they show the combination which indicates that the unseen powers have begun to give their attention. The use of these divination sticks has also been reported for at least one group of Tai, descendants of several Black Tai villagers who migrated to central Thailand a long time ago.<sup>56</sup> The chicken is a source of many Hmong divination implements. The Hmong examine the sacrificed

<sup>54</sup> I. de Beauclair, *Tribal Cultures of Southwest China*, Asian Folklore and Social Life Monographs, Volume II, Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1970, pp. 54-55.

<sup>55</sup> Nusit Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, p. 110; De Beauclair also mentions a Black Hmong dog sacrifice,

but provides no details (*Tribal Cultures of Southwest China*, p. 55).

<sup>56</sup> L. R. Pedersen, "Religious Activities during Dry Season among the Lao Song Dam, Thailand", *Folk, Dansk Etnografisk Tidsskrift*, Volume 16-17, 1974-1975, p. 356.

chicken's tongue bone. This ought to show a straight middle bone, curving upwards. If this middle bone leans right or left, or curves backwards it indicates bad fortune. Also the colour of the tongue and that of the skull are taken into account. The diviner takes particular care to clean the thigh bones, and examine the small holes in them. These holes ought to lie on the inner side of the bones, rather than the outside.<sup>57</sup> A final part of the chicken which may be studied are the toes, which ought to be straight and symmetrical.<sup>58</sup> A diviner may try to balance a fresh egg on the side of a bottle, whilst mentioning a series of outside agents which may be involved with a person's sickness. The moment when this difficult feat succeeds is regarded as the positive answer.

The details of sacrificial rituals and divination practices correspond so neatly with those which have been established for the Tai, that some rather intimate contact at some point of history may be assumed. The distribution of the Hmong, which is over a wide belt across southern China and stretching as far as the island of Hainan<sup>59</sup>, does not deny this possibility. An argument against it is the fact that their habitat, high up in the hills, would not lead to intensive cultural contact and exchange. A theory which would take all these points into account would be the one in which the Hmong are depicted as people who used to be lowland dwellers who were forced to seek their living in the highlands as a result of severe clashes with the Chinese. The evidence brought forward in this section may, however, not be regarded as conclusive. Some of the villages, which formed the basic observation units for the ethnographers' reports, may have been influenced by Tai peoples in comparatively recent times.<sup>60</sup>

### i) The Chinese traditions

Human sacrifices are recorded in Chinese history, often in connection with warfare. Prisoners of war were sometimes beheaded and their blood smeared on the pole of victory which was carried by the Chinese army. If an enemy prince was captured the emperor could decide to sacrifice him in the manner described above and bathe his feet in his victim's blood.<sup>61</sup> Such accounts have little or nothing in common with the ritual human sacrifices encountered thus far. Other human sacrifices took place during burials, but such customs are mainly recorded for the centuries immediately preceding the Han period.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Nusi Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>58</sup> H. A. Bernatzik, *Akha und Miao, Probleme der Angewandten Völkerkunde in Hinterindien*, Innsbruck: Wagner'sche Univ. Buchdruckerei, 1947, Volume I, pp. 181-82 and p. 192.

<sup>59</sup> F. M. Savina, *Histoire des Miao*, Hong-kong: Imprimerie de la Société des Missions-Etrangères, 1924, pp. 100-102.

<sup>60</sup> The intimate relationship between one Hmong group and the Tung-chia, a Tai-speaking lowland group of southern China, are described by I. de Beauclair, "A Miao Tribe of Southeast Kweichow and its

Cultural Configuration", p. 162 *et seq.* These Hmong are reported to have taken the plains culture into the mountains.

<sup>61</sup> F. H. Giles, "Some Gleanings of Manners and Customs of the Chinese People as Revealed in Historical Narratives and Novels", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XX, Pt. 3, 1927, pp. 227-28.

<sup>62</sup> J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Volume II, Book I, Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing, 1972, p. 721 *et seq.* See also M. Granet, *The Religion of the Chinese People* (translated and edited by M. Freedman), Oxford: Blackwell, 1975, pp. 79-80.

For the purpose of this study more relevant information is the fact that in early China, as early as the second century of our era, thus at the end of what in this study is called the "Proto Tai" period, dogs were sometimes slaughtered. For this, white dogs were selected and their carcasses were hung at the city gates in order to ward off calamities. The dog's blood was also sprinkled around for exorcising purposes.<sup>65</sup>

With respect to divination, from very early times the Chinese oracle bone divination system developed. The details need not be elaborated here since this type of divination has not been encountered amongst the Tai.<sup>66</sup> A different Chinese divination system, one which has been found amongst the Tai and other ethnic groups, is the use of the divining blocks. This goes back at least to the eighth century of our era. A Chinese altar is not complete without at least a pair of such blocks. In early times they have been described as kidney-shaped pieces of bamboo root, six to eight inches long, each having one flat and one convex side. They are dropped on the ground and if they both end lying with their flat or with the convex side up, the answer is read as negative. If one shows convex and the other flat, it is considered as a positive sign from the unseen power who is being addressed.<sup>67</sup> The divination with a cock's shin bones, the small holes of which serve to determine luck or misfortune, also is a custom found in China and which goes back a considerable number of centuries. It has been described for the people of Kwangtung as far back as the early Han period.<sup>68</sup>

#### j) The Ch'iang

In the varied literature on minority groups in southern China, a communal springtime sacrifice amongst the Ch'iang, who live in western Szechuan, was encountered.<sup>69</sup> Although there is no reason to believe that the Ch'iang and the Tai peoples have ever been in direct contact, it is interesting to take note of these customs. Indeed, the fact that no direct contact may be presumed makes it a case in which, to a certain extent, the premises of this book may be tested. If a large number of ritual details prove to be similar, it will be necessary to re-assess the model of early Tai history upon which this analysis rests.

Every spring the Ch'iang hold a large-scale ceremony in order to ask for good crops, for rain and for a prosperous year. In return they promise to

<sup>65</sup> J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Volume VI, Book II, p. 1006, *et seq.*

<sup>66</sup> The Lolo are reported to throw lamb's shoulderbones in the fire and to examine the resulting cracks. For details see Lin Yuch-hua, *The Lolo of Liang Shan* (translated by Ju-Shu Pan), New Haven: HRAF Press, 1961, pp. 128-29. The Lolo method of making a great number of parallel incisions on wood and counting whether or not they come to an uneven number (this being auspicious), resembles very much the Kachin system of tearing a leaf in long shreds, which has been described above. For that matter, there is a certain similarity between

throwing a shoulder blade in the fire and a piece of bamboo; in both cases the destructive forces of the fire leave tell-tale signs.

<sup>67</sup> De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Volume VI, Book II, pp. 1285-87.

<sup>68</sup> References to the appropriate Chinese sources are mentioned in H. Stübel, *Die Li-Stämme der Insel Hainan, ein Beitrag zur Volkskunde Südchinas*, Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1937, p. 69.

<sup>69</sup> D. C. Graham, *The Customs and Religion of the Ch'iang*, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Volume 135, Number 1, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1958, pp. 58-64 and pp. 102-3.

give a second offer in the fall, after it can be decided whether or not the year will indeed be good. These offerings are made at two places, on the housetops and at the sacred groves. Women, who are believed to be impure and unworthy, are not allowed to attend these rituals. Yaks, goats and cockerels are the animals most frequently used in sacrifices, but of these animals, the goat is most important and most frequently selected. Only male, fully-grown animals are used, and if more than one animal is killed they must all be of the same colour, all black or all white. The animals are purified by being led through smoke and they are tied up at a pen at the sacred grove. Their throats are cut and the blood caught in a vessel. Some of it is sprinkled around. The goats are divided up in stages: first the right ear and genitals are taken, the ear being stuck on a paper flag and then the penis and testicles are roasted on a fire, which must be made of cedar twigs. The altar is a circular offering stone. The rest of the animals is skinned and its fat is collected and placed on fresh twigs. The brains and kidneys are separately offered to the gods. Finally the flesh and blood are boiled and eaten and any remainder may be divided and taken home by the participants.

It is clear from this summary account that, though the two groups share a general sacrificial tradition, the Tai and the Ch'iang differ completely in the ritual details.

#### k) The Muong

The largest collective Muong ritual is the one held in late January or early February, which corresponds with their New Year. At that time the villagers observe certain restrictions; they refrain from work in the fields and place bamboo, star-shaped interdiction signs which they call *wa leo*.<sup>88</sup> They prepare seven separate dishes of sweets, as well as some game, such as deer. If no game has been obtained for the occasion, a buffalo, a pig, or a number of fowls may serve as substitute. During the night, to the accompaniment of gun shots and gong beating the aforementioned dishes are presented at the village chief's house. The next morning the meat, cakes and rice-wine are offered at the cult house, where prayers are said and all people prostrate formally. Separate gifts are made to the guardian spirits, to the ancestors, to the spirit of the earth, to the spirit of rice and to the spirit of buffaloes.

Amongst the Muong, killing of any animals near an altar is strictly avoided. The victims are immolated and prepared beforehand, so as not to disturb the feelings of the higher beings. Blood may never flow before the spirits, because the shedding of blood is a violent act.<sup>89</sup> The animals that may be offered range from various types of game to domestic animals, such as buffalo, pig, duck, chicken and also dog. The latter occupies a special place, because dog meat is generally not eaten amongst the Muong and only after a prescribed dog sacrifice, such as the one during the first sowing ceremony, will they break this food taboo.

Several methods of divination are mentioned by Cuisinier. A common one is the throwing of bamboo sticks in order to discover whether or not a

<sup>88</sup> J. Cuisinier, *Les Muong, géographie humaine et sociologie*, Université de Paris, Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, Volume XLV, Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1946, p. 136, 288 and 509. The following details are taken from the same source.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 352-53.



spirit has made contact with the priest or whether this spirit finds the offerings acceptable. Another consists of the examination of a boiled chicken's toes, in order to discover if a family may expect a good year or whether there are problems lying ahead. A family's fortunes may also be explored by letting all members light a cotton wick each of which has been drenched in oil. All those whose wicks burn well may expect a good fortune, but if a wick does not catch fire easily or if it burns badly it bodes ill for its holder. The diviner will suddenly wave forcefully with his fan, and if all flames extinguish with the first movement, the family as a whole cannot expect much luck. If, on the other hand, some wicks keep burning, this is taken as a good sign.<sup>70</sup>

Muong sacrifices are thus found to diverge considerably from those of the Tai. Whilst the Tai consider the flow of blood near an altar an essential aspect of the ceremony, the Muong do their utmost to avoid this. Whilst the Tai choose a buffalo as their best gift for the guardian spirits, the Muong prefer to offer a deer. Whilst the Tai kill a dog to ward off sickness, the Muong kill a dog during an agricultural ritual. In the divination techniques of the two groups there are, however, considerable similarities and also the two ethnic groups share the use of the bamboo interdiction sign.

#### **I) Other Vietnamese minority groups**

Apart from the Muong people there are many other ethnic divisions in Vietnam, such as the Tahai, the Rengao, the Bahnar, and the Stieng (who all speak Mon-Khmer languages), and the Jarai (representatives of the few peoples in mainland Southeast Asia speaking a Malayo-Polynesian language). The rich sacrificial traditions of these minority groups cannot be all described here in details, but for the purpose of this study certain aspects have been extrapolated from the ethnographic accounts.

In general, the Vietnamese highlanders sacrifice buffaloes, oxen, pigs, goats and fowls. Dog sacrifices are rare, and they appear to be held only on exceptional occasions. The Stieng must sacrifice a black dog to atone for murder.<sup>71</sup> A horse sacrifice can be held amongst the Jarai. Several of these groups reserve white animals for offerings to the spirit of thunder, and black ones for the spirits of spiders. Only men attend the great communal sacrifices.

The sacrificial details, such as the method of killing, the way of presenting gifts, the shape of the altars and other ritual paraphernalia are often considerably at variance with those recorded for the Tai peoples.<sup>72</sup> As an example of a typical Vietnamese highland sacrifice, the most important Jarai communal festival is taken. This lasts seven days and it is held during the dry season. During this great sacrifice every family kills a buffalo, a pig, and a goat. The day before the killing the buffalo, with his horns decorated, is tied to the foot of the great mast which rises over the sacrificial post. The

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 484-85.

<sup>71</sup> P. Guilleminet, "La tribu Bahnar du Kontum", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume XLV, 1952, p. 422.

<sup>72</sup> J. Boulbet, *Pays des Maa', domaine des genies Nggar Maa', Nggar Yaang*, Publication de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient,

Volume LXII, Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1967, pp. 51-54; M. M. J. Kemlin, "Rites agraires des Reungao", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume IX, 1909, pp. 493-94; Le-Van-Hao, "Les fêtes saisonnières au Vietnam" *Revue du Sud-est Asiatique*, 1962, No. 4, pp. 265-315.

next day the animal has his legs tied together and lies on his side when he is pierced in the chest with lance thrusts. Then a pig and a goat are also killed. The blood of the three animals is smeared on the front, stomach and arms of all members of the family. A tree is planted between the posts where the animal is killed. The long masts at the foot of which the buffalo dies appear to symbolise gigantic stalks of paddy. The buffalo's blood will make the ground at the masts fertile, just as the rains will help the paddy grow in the field.<sup>73</sup> The Jarai consider blood to be spirit's nurture, and therefore they do not consume any of the sacrificed animal's blood. Evil spirits are believed to be especially fond of goats' blood. Therefore one of the methods of driving away evil spirits from a village consists of the killing of a goat in a river. The blood rapidly flows away, hopefully taking the greedy malevolent powers along.<sup>74</sup>

#### m) The Khmer

There are many accounts of human sacrifices in Cambodia and some of these are authentic reports. By and large, Khmer human sacrifices fall into two categories. The first consists of an offering to appease a powerful spirit and to ask for the region's prosperity and rain. The sacrificer, armed with a sabre, dances around the victim and severs his head with a single cut. The direction in which the blood streams is used to predict the future. If it spreads evenly over the ground rain may be expected in the entire district, but if blood falls to one side only part of the region would obtain good rains. The victim's head is impaled and his flesh is chopped into many pieces and offered to the divinity. Buffalo offerings have taken the place of these human sacrifices, but they are performed in a similar manner; the way its blood flows is interpreted similarly and its meat is divided in the same way.<sup>75</sup>

This account appears related to the somewhat vague oral history reported earlier for southern Laos, whereby it is said that formerly humans were immolated in order to obtain rain. When it is realised that the Cambodian rites, described above, are of considerable age, going back to the time when the Khmer empire extended over the region now called southern Laos, it becomes apparent that the Laotian account refers to the old Cambodian practices.

The second type of human sacrifice concerns the burial of a live person on the spot where monuments, gates or fortifications were built. This interment under the foundations is intended to create fierce guardian spirits. The custom has already been mentioned for the Burmese and the Siamese.

The Cambodian village communal sacrifice has been described in some detail by Porée-Maspero. The ritual may be held twice a year, once at the end of the dry season, to ask for rain, and once at the end of the rainy

<sup>73</sup> J. D. Lajoux, *Le tambour du déluge, villages des montagnes d'Indochine*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977, pp. 6-11 and pp. 102-5.

<sup>74</sup> P. B. Lafont, *Toloi Djuat, Coutumier de la tribu Jarai*, Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, Volume LI, Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1963, p. 210 and p. 253.

<sup>75</sup> D. P. Chandler, "Royally Sponsored Human Sacrifices in Nineteenth Century Cambodia; the Cult of Nak Ta Me Sa (Mahisasuramardini) at Ba Phnom" *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume 62, Pt. 2, 1974, p. 221; Porée-Maspero, *Etude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, Volume I, pp. 245-46.

season, to ask for happiness and peace. On the night preceding the sacrifice, the villagers dance and play music throughout the night in front of an altar of two levels, which has been set up at the foot of a stone, under a great tree. The next morning functionaries await there the coming of the guardian spirit and the villagers, in procession, bring a buffalo and tether him to a nearby tree. The officiating priest goes in trance and becomes possessed with the guardian spirit. The buffalo's throat is cut with a knife and its blood is caught in an earthenware vase. As soon as the animal is dead, the head is severed and presented to the guardian spirit, and the rest of the body is further divided. The priest, still possessed by the spirit, drinks some blood and eats some cooked meat before distributing the remainder. Villagers then ask him whether or not the future looks promising. Not long afterwards the spirit leaves, and the villagers prepare and eat the buffalo meat. Nothing may be taken home.

Of the Cambodian divination techniques, mention has already been made of watching a sacrificial victim's blood flow. Sometimes the quantity of blood is taken as an indication of the types of rain which will predominate in the coming season; a rich amount being a sign of abundant rain. On other occasions the ground directly under the victim is taken as a map of the region, just as the Laotian stone, over which water was poured, is taken as a district map. In this wider perspective it may be asked whether or not the Khmer and Lao customs are basically the same. In this light it could be imagined that the Laotian stone represents an old sacrificial stone which may have been drenched in blood during the ritual. Another Cambodian divination technique, and this time one which has not been mentioned for the Tai, consists of turning three candles upside down whilst they are alight, and letting them drip wax on a piece of banana leaf. The three candles may be taken to stand for three specific regions. If a candle suddenly extinguishes, it is taken as a bad sign for the corresponding region. The flow of wax may increase or decrease during the fast burning and this indicates periods of abundant rain and dryness respectively. If bits of wax drop down whilst still alight, this is taken as an indication of severe thunderstorms. The resulting wax patterns on the banana leaf are also used to foretell the future.<sup>77</sup>

#### n) The Pear

The last group in this overview of peoples who surround the Tai are the Pear, Mon-Khmer speakers in the upland regions of Cambodia.<sup>78</sup> The only animals sacrificed by the Pear are buffaloes, oxen, pigs and fowls. The Pear celebrate communal sacrificial rituals every year in May and in December. When there is a drought, an epidemic, or some other calamity threatens a Pear village, they hold the great Sen Kol feast which lasts two days and a night. Sen Kol is held outside the village where a shrine is built, which is surrounded by banana trunk stems. On the first day the sacrificial buffalo is led to the shrine, the guardian spirit of the region is evoked and the priest may be possessed by this power. For the actual buffalo killing a special sacrificial knife is used. The buffalo is tied between two posts and its neck

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242 ff.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume II, p. 410.

<sup>78</sup> J. Brengues, "Note sur les populations

de la région des montagnes des Cardamones", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume II, 1906, p. 35 ff.

as well as the back tendons are cut. A piece of money is offered to the ground where the killing took place. The head is carried to a place in front of the shrine where three sticks stand and it is impaled upon the largest of these. At this site banana trees and sugar cane are planted. A woman then comes forward with a tray containing paddy and boiled rice, as well as the animal's liver. These are thrown in front of the impaled buffalo head.

## Analysis

### 1) *Human sacrifices*

In the previous sections, several distinct types of human sacrifice have been discussed. Firstly there are records of humans killed during funerals amongst the Ahom, the Shan and in pre-Han China. In all these cases human sacrifice forms part of the funeral customs of members of the most powerful noble families. The offering may be seen as an elaboration on the more general theme of destroying an object or a living thing in order to make it available to the deceased. The custom has been reported for two adjoining Tai groups only and therefore it does not qualify for inclusion as part of the Ancient Tai customs. At this stage of the research it is even impossible to assess whether the Ahom and the Shan customs are related because a number of ritual details have been collected only for the Ahom. Similarly, until the exact manner of presenting the dead with human sacrifices in pre-Han China has been taken into account, it is unwarranted to suggest that the custom is, or is not, related to that of some of the Tai.

A second type which has been encountered is the periodical human sacrifice in order to satisfy a particular powerful spirit. There are a number of instances of this type, such as the Khasi Thlen offering, the Koch beheading between two pillars, the Chutiya offerings to Pisha-si, the Ahom feasting of Phii Mae Thao, the Shan offering of four virgins, the Lao account of a king who used to behead two victims and the Cambodian periodical human sacrifices to obtain rain and prosperity. The evidence which has been presented suggests that the Khasi and the Koch customs are unrelated to those of the Tai, but that there has been borrowing from the Chutiya in the matter of the human offerings to Phii Mae Thao. The Shan sacrifices form a separate account which, through a lack of detailed description, thus far cannot be related to other known traditions. In the case of the account from southern Laos, it has been argued that most probably this refers to well-established Cambodian practices. Like the case of human offerings at funerals, there is no case for inclusion of this type of sacrifice in the Ancient Tai religion.

A third, quite distinct type of human sacrifice is the killing of people under city fortifications, and by extension, also under certain *mueang* pillars. The killing under buildings has been reported for the Burmese, the Shan, the Siamese and the Khmer, whilst accounts of *mueang* pillar immolations come from the Yuan, the Siamese and the Lao. In all cases it is believed that the victim will be transformed into a strong guardian spirit. The evidence brought together suggests that the Shan and the Siamese adopted the custom as a result of their intimate contacts with the Burmese and Cambodians, and that the reports, thus far unsubstantiated, of people being crushed under

a "city pillar" are also derived from the Burmese and Cambodians. These types of customs have not been found amongst Tai peoples who have had little or no contact with Burmese or Khmer. The third type therefore may also not be included in the Ancient Tai religion. The custom of burying a live being in a building's foundations can be found amongst many peoples of Europe and Asia. It is by no means certain that all these customs are related; only a study of the ritual details could throw light upon this question. In the case of mainland Southeast Asia it concerns a very specific state ceremony, whereby one or more victims were crushed to death. A few Tai groups appear to have developed a sub-type, wherein pregnant women were selected as victims. This relates to the Ancient Tai belief that the death of a pregnant woman will create a particularly strong and vicious spirit.

A final mention of human sacrifice is the report which tells that the Ahom coronation ritual included such an offering. It has been noted, however, that the evidence for the account is rather flimsy and that it is possible that the sacrifice for Phii Mae Thao became muddled up with this state ceremony. Even if the report will prove to be true, it appears but a local development, possibly the result of Saktism in the Ahom court.

## 2) *Animal sacrifices*

Whilst human sacrifices probably did not form part of the Ancient Tai customs, various types of animal sacrifices must have been important in the Ancient Tai religion. There can be no doubt as to the fact that animals were killed on many occasions: during life-cycle ceremonies, accompanying various healing processes and during agricultural rituals. In this respect the Ancient Tai seem to share many features with the folk religions surrounding them. Sacrificial religions are almost ubiquitous and, essential in the method adopted here, the ritual details, such as what type of animals are offered, where, in what manner, and at which time of the year, will be a guide, not only regarding deciding whether or not a certain aspect forms part of the Ancient Tai culture, but also whether this is shared with particular other traditions.

With respect to the types of animals sacrificed, all Tai groups for whom the sacrificial tradition has been recorded kill fowls or ducks regularly for relatively minor occasions, a pig for more important events and a buffalo offering is everywhere considered the largest sacrifice. The annual or semi-annual buffalo sacrifice became the central ritual of this part of the book, mainly because it featured so largely in the memory of the Assamese Tai. Similar sacrifices were found amongst the Ahom, the Lue, the Yuan, the Tai of northeastern Thailand, the Lao, the Tai Neua, the Black, White, and Red Tai. This wide distribution indicates that the buffalo sacrifice formed part of the Ancient Tai tradition. From a general point of view, disregarding ritual details, the Tai seem to share a buffalo sacrifice with the Kachin, the Chin, the Lawa, the White Hmong, the Muong, with a range of other minority groups in Vietnam, and with the Khmer and the Pear. Unlike the Khasi, the Naga, some Assamese lowland groups, the Ch'iang and some Vietnamese minorities, most Tai groups do not include the goat as an important sacrificial animal. The fact that the Ahom include it in *uum phra* might be seen as evidence of assimilation of local Assamese sacrificial traditions with those of the Ahom.



Taking account of some of the ritual details, such as the fact that Tai rituals take place at specific times of the year, and that they must be held at a sacred precinct outside the actual village, the group of peoples sharing the Tai tradition becomes much smaller. Some ethnic groups do not celebrate the annual or semi-annual ritual, others hold their sacrifice in the heart of their village (Chin), or at the houses of individual families (Jarai). Fairly close similarities in the overall rituals have only been recorded for some of the Hmong, the P'u Noi, the Khmer and the Pear. Of these four groups, the first two reputedly have been heavily influenced by Tai culture. The closest correspondence thus appears to lie between Ancient Tai and certain Mon-Khmer peoples. This may be relevant as a building stone in a future study of the background of Tai culture.

The dog has proven to be a very interesting sacrificial animal. In the previous chapter a dog sacrifice had been noted for the Ahom, the Phakey, the Nua, the Lao, the Neua, the Red Tai and the Chuang. In a considerable number of cases the dog sacrifice has been connected with the warding off of disease or some other threat. In the wider perspective, presented in this chapter, dog sacrifices made under similar circumstances have been noted for the Akha, the Karen and the Hmong and it has been recorded also for the Chinese at the beginning of the first millennium A.D. With the available evidence it is impossible to say whether or not the Muong and the Stieng dog sacrifices fit in with the pattern. The distribution of the dog sacrifice to ward off evil indicates that all the instances are related and that hence some contact between the dog-sacrificing groups may be presumed. The evidence presented thus far is compatible with the view that the Ancient Tai learned the practice from the Chinese some time prior to their spread over Southeast Asia. This would concord with the broad outline of Tai cultural history which forms the basis of this study, in which fairly close cultural contacts between the Tai and the Chinese are presumed to have occurred between the end of the Han period and the eighth century A.D.

With respect to the colour of the sacrificial animals, it has already been noted that Tai peoples occasionally specify the colour of the victim, such as when the Phakey choose a white buffalo to give to Phii Suea Mueang, or the Lue may specify a black one. Altogether nine instances have been recorded for which a white animal was prescribed (Ahom, Khamyang, Phakey, Yuan, and White Tai) and nine cases when a black one should be killed (Ahom, Khamyang, Lue, Yuan, and Lao). In addition there were two instances when both a black and a white animal is slaughtered (Lue and Yuan). The three occasions for which the colour red has been mentioned amongst the Tai were for dog sacrifice (Ahom, Phakey, Lao). A cream-coloured buffalo was mentioned once, as was also a brown swan. No regular pattern which reveals a deeper meaning given to each of these colours is discernible in the Tai material.

The evidence brought together from the wider overview reinforces the findings for the Tai. Dubois mentions the Hindu choice of a white horse, but his editor considers him mistaken and establishes that it ought to be a black one. The Kachin give white animals to ward off epidemics. The Chinese kill a white dog to that purpose. Vietnamese minority groups sometimes choose white animals and on other occasions black ones. Overall, the white and the black colour predominate in the cases where this aspect

has been recorded. Again, no pattern is readily discernible in the choice between these two favourite colours. The broad perspective shows that the colour red is also occasionally prescribed amongst peoples other than Tai. The Hmong know the red dog sacrifice, possibly as the result of intimate contact with Tai culture. The Lawa select a red bull, a red cock and a red hen for their regular sacrifice, and on another occasion they prefer a cream-coloured bull. It is essential that the bull in question is not castrated and is even in colour "to the hairs of his tail".<sup>79</sup>

The last remark may provide an important clue regarding the colour prescriptions. The colour-specification may well be directly related to the general principle that the greatest gifts to the gods must be without any blemish and of great beauty. Amongst the traditional Tai groups, as well as amongst many of their neighbours, it is not permitted to present the gods an animal which is sick, old, or maimed. To be effective, attractive and persuasive, the offering must be strong and vigorous. Hence at least some of the prescriptions regarding colour may be simply the outcome of a wish to give a thing of beauty.

In some of the cases, the choice of colour is prescribed by nature. It would be difficult to find a boar in traditional Southeast Asia which is not black. Similarly, a duck or a fowl of an even colour tends to be pure white. This consideration may explain some of the cases where a red dog is selected for sacrifice, for dogs with reddish coats predominate in the region. However, this reference to the laws of nature explains by no means all cases. Sometimes there may even be a deeper, hidden, symbolic meaning attached to a specific selection of colour, but until now there have been no clear cases collected. It is not impossible that a deeper meaning of the red colour for some dog sacrifices will be found in a systematic analysis of myths and legends, for it has been remarked by several researchers that the dog may have featured large in some myths as an ancestral animal, and that there are traces of what some authors believe to be "totemism" in these beliefs.<sup>80</sup>

At the end of chapter 4 of this book, the problem of why some Tai groups refer to a dog with the expression "golden deer" was raised. It is unlikely that this reflects a practice whereby a real deer of a particular hue was sacrificed, because, unlike domestic animals, the people are not in control of what type of game they will be able to bring home for an offering. The wider reading on sacrifices suggests a possible explanation for this peculiar custom. A Ch'iang priest makes use of a series of ritual "riddles" when addressing the spirits, substituting ordinary words with elaborate expressions which have no immediate relevant meaning to the outsider. The Ch'iang priest presenting offerings to the gods says "black liquor"

<sup>79</sup> E. W. Hutchinson, "The Lawa in Northern Siam", p. 159.

<sup>80</sup> The remarkable position of the dog can be found in the following sources. A.L.M. Bonifacy, "Etude sur les Tay de la riviere Claire, au Tonkin et dans la Chine meridionale (Yun nan et Kouang si)", *Toung Pao*, Volume VIII, 1907, p. 95; W. Koppers, "Der Hund in der Mythologie der Zirkumpazifischen Völker",

*Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik*, Volume I, 1930, pp. 359-399; H. Stübel, "The Yao of the Province of Kuangtung", *Monumenta Serica*, Volume III, 1938, p. 373, and his *Die Li-Stämme der Insel Hainan*, p. 277; and E. Porcé-Maspero, *Etude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, Volume II, pp. 435-6 et passim.

instead of "water", "pure drink" instead of "fermented liquor", "excellent potherb" instead of "rice", "abundant root" instead of "leek", "animal with broad feet" instead of "ox", "stiff silk" instead of "pig" and "clear-sighted one" instead of "hare".<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the Tantric Saivite Ahom do not use the ordinary word for rice-wine when they offer each other this beverage during their secret rituals, but have a special word amongst initiates for this important ritual ingredient. It is not here suggested that "golden deer", Ahom rice-wine and Ch'iang ritual circumscriptions are the result of sharing the same tradition, nor is it intended to show some type of cultural contact, for the development of word-substitutes and euphemisms may take place under many, often unrelated, circumstances. The parallels serve to indicate a possible reason for the use of "golden deer" when "dog" is meant.

The fact that amongst Tai peoples as well as amongst some of their neighbours dogs are killed specifically in order to ward off danger and disease is possibly a direct extension of their role and position in Southeast Asian households. In the Tai villages dogs are by no means "man's intimate friends who share the warmth of the hearth". On the contrary, the Tai will usually not allow a dog up the ladder which leads to the living quarters. They are kept away from the areas where people usually sit and they are never fondled closely and heartily. All people are aware of the fact that dog is a scavenger and that this animal eats often unclean matter. Their chief role is to protect the house.<sup>82</sup> Strangers have cause to fear the dog's bark and his teeth and, by extension, the evil spirits may be kept away by the dog's bellicose spirit after it has been sacrificed. In this context it may be noted that in the literature on sacrifices in Southeast Asia, no reference has yet been found to a cat offering. It seems that the cat may be the only domesticated animal of the region to escape ritual slaughter.

### 3) The *talaeo*

The *talaeo* is a grating or a star-shaped device made solely of bamboo splints. Sometimes it comes in the form of a star with three, five, or six points, on other occasions the number of bamboo laths used is so great that the grating forms a rough circle. It is always used as a sign to warn people or evil spirits to stay away. For the Tai peoples they have been encountered amongst the Shan, the Lue, the Yuan, the Siamese, the Lao, the White Tai and the Red Tai.<sup>83</sup> There can be little doubt as to the fact that these *talaeo*

<sup>81</sup> D. C. Graham, *The Customs and Religion of the Ch'ang*, p. 84.

<sup>82</sup> A much more intimate relationship between man and dog is described for some Hmong Njua by Nusi Chindarsi. (*The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, p. 168).

<sup>83</sup> For the Shan, see Kauffmann, "Thread-square and *Talaeo*", p. 496; for the Lue, see Izikowitz, "Notes about the Tai"; for the Yuan, see Notton, *Annales de Siam*, Volume I, p. 62; for the Siamese, see Kingkeo Attagara, *The Folk Religion of Ban Nai, a Hamlet in Central Thailand*, Bangkok: Kurusupha Press, 1967, p. 61, Phya Anuman Rajadon, "Notes on the

Thread Square in Thailand", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume LV, Pt. 2, 1967, pp. 162-4, and McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, p. 271; for the Lao see Archaimbault, "Le liang du ho devata luong à Luong Prabang", pp. 230-31, L. Mogenet, "Notes sur la conception de l'espace à Louang Prabang", *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, Volume 7-8, 1972, pp. 176-8, and Chao Kham Man Vongkot Rattana, "Les rites du culte des phi", p. 98; for the White Tai, H. Deydier, *Lokapala*, p. 230; and for the Red Tai see R. Robert, *Notes sur les Tay Deng*, Plates XXXVIII and XXXIX.

signs are related: they share not only the similar-sounding appellation, but they are also used under comparable conditions. To both the Siamese and the Red Tai, for example, the sign indicates "keep off", and it may be placed at a stretch of water in order to demarcate fishing rights, or it may be placed close-by a cluster of bamboo or a honey comb as a signal that somebody has already claimed ownership. A *talaeo* may be placed at the entrance of a field as an indication that beasts are not allowed to graze. Often the *talaeo* is a charm to keep out evil spirits, which is hung above a door, placed on top of a container with a medicinal brew, or near a sacred precinct.

Kauffmann, who has made a considerable study of the symbol, recognises two separate uses of the *talaeo*. The first use is as boundary indicator and for protection; often it is an amulet to ward off harmful forces. The second use which Kauffmann recognises is that of a symbol to "attract spirits". Examples of the latter are the Laotian *talaeo* at the centre of a sacrificial site, the Lawa placing of this sign near their spirit huts, the Lisu attachment of *talaeos* to some posts, the Karen placing them at altars for the field spirit, and the use of *talaeos* in streams when asking the water-spirit for a good catch.<sup>84</sup> On first sight, the two uses seem contradictory, the symbol being used on the one hand to ward off spirits, and on the other to attract them. In my opinion, however, all these instances cover but one and the same use of the symbol, namely to keep out those who do not belong, to ward off strangers, outsiders and destructive powers. A *talaeo* on a road means: "Strangers and illness-bringing powers keep out", and this does not prevent any local inhabitant from passing that spot. After all, he has no reason to heed the sign. The same may be said of the Lao *talaeo* at the sacrificial site: it scares away evil powers, but does not prevent the gods from descending and taking possession of the spirit medium.

Since a considerable range of Tai groups share the symbol, and since these include groups as far apart as the Siamese, the Shan and the Red Tai, it is likely that the *talaeo* has been known to the Tai for a considerable period of time. Before deciding upon the likely age of the symbol, it is necessary to examine the wider distribution.

The star-shaped bamboo interdiction sign has also been found amongst the Palaung, the Kachin<sup>85</sup>, the Akha (who call it *da leh*), the Lawa (who call it *talia*<sup>86</sup>), the Hmong who live in northern Thailand<sup>87</sup>, the P'u Noi, the Lahu (who call it *leh-o*), the Sedang<sup>88</sup>, the Khmu (*ta le*), the Karen, the Lamet (*tala*)<sup>89</sup>, the Kha of Laos (*tha-leo*)<sup>90</sup> and the Muong (*wa leo*). Apparently these groups share not only the symbol and its use, but also the same word for it. The *talaeo* sign is thus reported for a variety of peoples living in northern Vietnam, in Laos, in northern Burma and in Thailand. Thus far no trace has been found of such a sign in Cambodia. In fact, the Cambodian

<sup>84</sup> Kauffmann, "Thread-square and Talaeo", p. 496.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Professor H. E. Kauffmann, personal communication, 2 September, 1980.

<sup>87</sup> Kauffmann, "Thread-square and Talaeo", p. 496.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> K. G. Izikowitz, *Lamet, Hill Peasants in French Indochina*, Etnologiska Studier, no. 17, Göteborg: Etnografiska Museet, 1951, pp. 54, 153, 220 and 255.

<sup>90</sup> A. W. Macdonald, "Notes sur la claustration villageoise dans l'Asie du Sud-est", *Journal Asiatique*, Volume CCXLV, Pt. 2, 1957, pp. 197-8.

people have their own types of interdiction signs which are quite different in shape and name from the *talao*.<sup>91</sup> Evidently the symbol is encountered in a particular delineated region, where it is shared amongst many groups, regardless of cultural or linguistic affiliations. The *talao* serves as an "international road symbol" in the region outlined above. This is not surprising, since its very function is to warn strangers to "keep off", and it is effective simply because it is shared and recognised. As to the period when the Tai peoples adopted the symbol, the evidence suggests that this occurred after the Tai had just begun their dispersion over large stretches of mainland Southeast Asia, probably at the beginning of the second millennium A.D.

During both fieldwork periods in Assam, pictures of Tai ritual scenes were often shown to ritual specialists in the hope that the sight might trigger off memories. Some of these scenes contained various shapes and types of *talao*, and often the informants were asked if they had seen such a sign. All Ahom, Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti specialists who were asked this question declared that the symbol was completely unknown to them. However, one of these, a Khamyang-speaker, enquired about the use of the sign, and when he heard that it was a *talao*, a symbol indicating a prohibition to enter, he spontaneously volunteered the information that the word made sense. In Khamyang language, namely, a piece of paper on which is written that a village is closed for ritual purpose is called "*an tap*". The word *tap* means "prohibited". *Talao*, to this Khamyang informant, could be made up of *tap* and *laeo*, or "prohibition-sign". At first sight this reconstruction by a Tai-speaker who is not familiar with the ritual object itself, can be regarded as purely speculative. Many people would prefer the "standard" derivation, which traces the word as having originated from "bird-of-prey's eye" (*taa* = eye, *yiew* = hawk, kite, bird-of-prey).<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the possibility that *tap*, in the meaning of "forbidden", may have been the original stem from which *ta* in the word *talao* was derived cannot be dismissed out of hand. Note ought to be taken of the fact that the Neua call the message which is hung across a road to warn off strangers during the time that a village is ritually closed, a *tap ou peo*.<sup>93</sup> Linguists will have to decide whether or not the Khamyang and Neua words *tap* are one and the same. Personally I would like to speculate that *tap* and *tap ou* may well be the old words for prohibition, also known in various Austronesian languages, and which have found their way in the international vocabulary as "taboo".

#### 4) Divination techniques

The overview of Tai divination practices at the end of chapter 4 came up with several fairly widespread methods, namely the examination of the sacrificed animal's liver (Ahom, Khamyang, Lao), scrutinising the fowl's tongue bone (Ahom, Siamese, Tai of northeast Thailand, Lao) and fowl's thigh bone divination (Ahom, Chuang). In the wider overview all three techniques have been encountered amongst certain other groups.

<sup>91</sup> E. Porée-Maspero, *Etude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, Volume II, pp. 332-33.

<sup>92</sup> C. Notton, *Annales de Siam*, Volume I, p. 62 fn. 2.

<sup>93</sup> A. Bourlet, "Les Tay", p. 625.



The examination of the liver was also found with the Khasi and the Akha. Only the latter group appears to have had intensive contact with the "liver-examining" Tai, and the common practice may be assumed to be the result of cultural borrowing. The Khasi case need not necessarily indicate a measure of contact. In the first place their technique has not been described in detail and it was not established what the ritual specialist looks for and how he interprets the signs. It is possible that the two reports deal with quite distinct customs. Secondly, there is no evidence from other aspects of the respective cultures suggesting that the peoples ever were in close contact.

The tongue bone examination case is quite different. The overview suggests that the Tai share the custom with the Lahu, the Khmu and the Hmong. The communities from which the ethnographic data hail seem to have had considerable opportunity during the last centuries of borrowing from Tai peoples. Since the custom appears fairly widespread for the Tai it suggests that in this case the Tai may have been the donors and the Lahu, Khmu and Hmong may have received the custom from the Tai.

The scanning of the literature resulted in quite spectacular findings in the case of the custom of examining fowls' thigh bones. It has been encountered amongst the Akha, the P'u Noi, the Lahu, the Hmong, and, extending the reading even further, it is found that the sticking of wooden pins in fowls' thigh bones has been reported to be a common divination practice for all tribes of the island of Hainan.<sup>24</sup> The common source for this widespread technique is found to be the Chinese culture, where the practice was encountered two millennia ago. The fact that the oldest Tai records (the early parts of the Ahom Buranjis) refer to the practice suggests that the Tai learned the custom some time before the spreading over mainland Southeast Asia. Possibly a clearer picture may be obtained by comparing details of the actual rules of interpretation.

The custom of interpreting the manner in which a sacrificed buffalo falls, and the direction of its blood flow, which had already been noted among the Lao and the Lue, appears to be shared with the Khmer. A case can be made for cultural borrowing, notably one from the Khmer to certain Tai groups. The same consideration goes for the practice of reading a moistened surface as a map of the region. This appears a strong, and long-established tradition amongst the Khmer, where it is used, not only using blood, but also with dripping wax, and it may well have formed the basis for the comparable Lao custom.

Apart from the Red Tai, the examination of a fowl's foot has been reported also amongst the Khmu, the Hmong and the Muong. These peoples have, during the last centuries, lived in proximity and since the practice seems to be unknown to other Tai peoples, it is suggested that the Red Tai learned it from one of their neighbours.

A Chinese divination practice, which goes back many millennia, is the throwing of large pieces of bone into a fire and interpreting the resulting cracks on the surface. The same custom is still reported for the Lolo. It has been noted in this chapter that the Kachin, the Hmong and the Muong practice of throwing a section of bamboo in the fire, letting it crack open,

<sup>24</sup> H. Stübel, *Die Li-Stämme der Insel Hainan*, p. 69.

and examining the details of the way it has burst, is reminiscent of the Chinese technique. If indeed the two types of divination techniques are but variants on the same theme, this would help explain its rather widely scattered occurrence, which may indicate a long and intricate process of diffusion. Thus far this technique has not been found amongst the Tai divination practices.

Another technique which probably first developed in China is the throwing of two bamboo sticks, each having a curved and a straight side. This appears to be one of the simplest chance games, the execution of which needs no special training. It seems fairly widely spread, and has been found for the Black Tai, who probably learnt it from one of their neighbours. Other simple games encountered are the fairly widespread techniques of taking a pinch of rice and counting if the number is even or uneven, or noticing whether an even or uneven number will lie on the top of an egg.

An examination of the various divination practices encountered thus far shows an intricate pattern of regional distributions. Egg smashing is only found in Assam, the examination of a fowl's intestines and the tearing up of leaves ranges in eastern Assam and adjacent Burma. The interpretation of holes in fowl's thigh bones can be found in a belt ranging from Assam through Burma, northern Thailand, Laos, southern China to Hainan Island. These, and other examples demonstrate that each technique appears to have its own history. Some techniques have a venerable one, going back thousands of years and sometimes being applied in virtually the same form throughout the ages. Possibly the most remarkable aspect to emerge from the overview of divination techniques is the fact that, compared to sacrificial ritual, they are relatively little culture-bound. Some of these techniques seem to have spread with only slight modifications from one ethnic group to another.

It is possible to suggest two reasons for this phenomenon of apparently little culture-boundness of many divination practices. The first one is the circumstance that all the peoples involved seem to share an interest in these matters. Amongst all the groups encountered there is a shared belief that communication can be established by invoking chance phenomena and taking the results as a message from the gods. Often the divination practices are but one of the methods used to gain contact with the unseen powers; the Ancient Tai must have also had a well-developed system of communicating with the help of people in trance. The second possible reason for the apparent small degree of culture-boundness is the fact that, given the shared interest in matters of establishing direct communication, all divination techniques are but means to a goal, and they are only as good as their results. When presented with a more satisfactory means of contacting the gods, ritual specialists may be willing to try it without apparently changing the essential features of their religion.

Just like the shared symbol *talao*, shared divination practices indicate cultural contact and borrowings, and a study of the details may reveal occasionally in which direction the contact must have taken place. However, it does not necessarily establish a case of intimate and prolonged contact. In order to demonstrate the latter a considerable number of individual borrowings must be found. Quite a different conclusion may be reached when there are close correspondences in the cultural areas such as

major life-cycle rituals or communal sacrificial rituals. The latter types comprise a much larger and more fundamental area of a cultural tradition. It was clear from the search in the literature that communal sacrificial rituals can take many shapes and forms, and that there were only very few of these rituals which could be compared with those of the Tai. In the wider perspective it becomes clear that the Tai sacrificial traditions form indeed a separate set of customs, distinct from those of most of their neighbours. This may be read as a corroboration of the premise that the Tai tradition, at some stage not too far in the past, indeed formed a homogeneous culture and that therefore the study of Ancient Tai culture is possible through comparing the time-honoured aspects of the individual Tai groups.

## PART B

### TIME-RECKONING

## ANCIENT ASPECTS OF TAI CALENDARS

In this chapter all units of time-reckoning are taken into consideration, namely eras, year cycles, months, weeks, days, and subdivisions of the days. Given the wide spread of the Tai peoples and the fact that they have often adopted features of calendar systems of neighbouring peoples, the subject is a very complex one. For example, the Tai of Assam call the month which begins in April with the Assamese term Bohag. The name of this month, as well as the calculation of its beginning and its duration, are derived from one of the Indian systems of time-reckoning. Some of the Tai groups who live further eastwards may recognise this month with a different term, and others show no sign of knowing either the month or the system underlying the calculation for its beginning. The presentation of the full details of each Tai calendar, together with the history of the cultural contacts which led to the formation of each particular system of time-reckoning would fill several books, whilst establishing many facts which may already be assumed without such a massive exercise. Thus, it is already quite well-known that the present-day Siamese and Laotian calendars have many elements in common with that of ancient Cambodia, and that the general direction of borrowing often went from Cambodia to Siam and Laos, at least in the matter of systems of time-reckoning. Similarly, the Tai groups in northern Vietnam derive many of their calendar data from the Vietnamese system and the Tai in southern China are, in this respect, quite dominated by the Chinese.

Therefore only certain aspects of Tai calendars are studied in this chapter, namely those which seem to reflect an early stage of development, or which appear to be not the result of relatively recent borrowing from neighbouring groups. This limits considerably the amount of information to be presented, not only because repetitive accounts of "Buddhist eras" or lists of the seven-day week are thus automatically culled, these being the result of contacts after the Tai spread over mainland Southeast Asia, but also because such aspects of time-reckoning have often escaped the notice of the traveller and the ethnographer, and indigenous sources on these features are also rare.

For each Tai group for whom apparently antiquated features of their calendar were obtained, the material is presented in the same order, namely from large units of time to small ones. After the overview of this factual information an assessment is made regarding which of these features seem sufficiently widespread as to qualify for possible inclusion in "Ancient Tai" culture. In the next chapter, the results are placed into a wider perspective.

### The Ahom

The largest unit of time which the Ahom used before (and after) they entered Assam at the beginning of the thirteenth century is the sixty-year cycle, known in Ahom as the *lak ni* cycle. This sixty-year cycle is ubiquitous in the old Buranjis and it is also used on the oldest Ahom coins. It has often



TABLE I  
THE AHOM SEXAGENARY CYCLE

Kap Saew 1st year	Kap Mit 11th year	Kap San 21st year	Kap Singa 31st year	Kap Si 41st year	Kap Ngi 51st year
Dap Plow 2nd year	Dap Kaew 12th year	Dap Rao 22nd year	Dap Mut 32nd year	Dap Chow 42nd year	Dap Mao 52nd year
Rai Ngi 3rd year	Rai Saew 13th year	Rai Mit 23rd year	Rai San 33rd year	Rai Singa 43rd year	Rai Si 53rd year
Mung Mao 4th year	Mung Plow 14th year	Mung Kaew 24th year	Mung Rao 34th year	Mung Mut 44th year	Mung Chow 54th year
Pluek Si 5th year	Pluek Ngi 15th year	Pluek Saew 25th year	Pluek Mit 35th year	Pluek San 45th year	Pluek Singa 55th year
Kat Chow 6th year	Kat Mao 16th year	Kat Plow 26th year	Kat Kaew 36th year	Kat Rao 46th year	Kat Mut 56th year
Khut Singa 7th year	Khut Si 17th year	Khut Ngi 27th year	Khut Saew 37th year	Khut Mit 47th year	Khut San 57th year
Rung Mut 8th year	Rung Chow 18th year	Rung Mao 28th year	Rung Plow 38th year	Rung Kaew 48th year	Rung Rao 58th year
Tow San 9th year	Tow Singa 19th year	Tow Si 29th year	Tow Ngi 39th year	Tow Saew 49th year	Tow Mit 59th year
Ka Rao 10th year	Ka Mut 20th year	Ka Chow 30th year	Ka Mao 40th year	Ka Plow 50th year	Ka Kaew 60th year

been described,<sup>1</sup> but, because of the peculiarities of an Assamese influenced system of transliteration which tends to obscure some of the similarities between Tai languages and Ahom,<sup>2</sup> the whole cycle of sixty years is once more written out in Table 1. From the manner in which this table is set out it is clear that the cycle is composed of two repeating series of terms, one series of ten, found at the beginning of the combination of words (Kap, Dap, Rai, Mung, Pluek, Kat, Khut, Rung, Tow, and Ka), and one of twelve, at the end of each combination (Saew, Plow, Ngi, Mao, Si, Chow, Singa, Mut, San, Rao, Mit, and Kaew). The first year of a cycle is Kap Saew. The series of ten is repeated six times and the series of twelve five times before the Kap Saew combination recurs and a new cycle begins.

The position of the Ahom sixty-year cycle with reference to the Western calendar is such that 1979-1980 is a Dap Mut year, the thirty-second year of a cycle. In traditional calendars the point in the Western year when the Ahom year changes name is half-November, at the beginning of the traditional Ahom first month of the year.

<sup>1</sup> N. N. Acharyya, *The History of Medieval Assam*, Gauhati: Dutta Baruah, 1966, pp. 130-31; B. Barua and N. N. Deodhai Phukan (editors), *Ahom Lexicons*, pp. 190-3; J. N. Phukan, "A Note on Lak-ni", *Journal of the University of Gauhati*, Volume XX, 1969, Arts, pp. 67-73.

<sup>2</sup> See above, Chapter 1, *A note on transliteration*. The exercise involved in the making of Table 1 comprised considerable work, because the sources in Ahom script,

including *Ahom Lexicons*, were often inconsistent in their spelling. For example, in order to decide upon a spelling for the ninth of the sixty-year cycle, it was necessary to choose between *taew* and *tow*, as well as between *chan* and *san*. *Tow* was preferred, because the variant *taew* appeared likely to have been caused by a printing error, whilst the choice between *chan* and *san* was decided in favour of *san* by the evidence found in present-day Ahom calendars.

The Ahom word for "month" is *din*. The twelve months of the year are, in regular order: Din Ching, Din Kam, Din Sam, Din Si, Din Haa, Din Ruk, Din Chit, Din Puet, Din Kao, Din Sip, Din Sip It, and Din Sip Song. Anybody familiar with one of the Tai languages will readily recognise most of these names, for, from the third month onwards they represent the ordinary Tai numerals from three until twelve. The first two months are not immediately clear, because they represent neither the regular Tai numerals one and two (in Ahom: *lueng* and *song*), nor do they form part of the series of numerals of Chinese origin used by Tai people to indicate birth order (see Volume I, Chapter 2). At present, the Ahom month is reckoned independently of the phases of the moon. Each month is solar and has been synchronised to coincide with the Assamese. In Table 2 the correspondences and length in days are enumerated. The Ahom differ in this respect from the Assamese system, not only in the names given to the months, but also in the calculation of the moment upon which the year begins. The Ahom year is counted from half-November, whilst the first Assamese month is Bohag, which falls in April.

TABLE 2  
AHOM AND ASSAMESE MONTHS

Ahom name	Assamese	International	Days
Din Ching	Aghon	November-December	30
Din Kam	Push	December-January	30
Din Sam	Magh	January-February	30
Din Si	Phagun	February-March	30
Din Haa	Sait	March-April	30
Din Ruk	Bohag	April-May	31
Din Chit	Jeth	May-June	31
Din Puet	Ahar	June-July	31
Din Kao	Shawon	July-August	31
Din Sip	Bhad	August-September	31
Din Sip It	Ahin	September-October	30
Din Sip Song	Katik	October-November	30

From the earliest parts of the Buranjis onward it is clear that the Ahom used, apart from the sexagenary year-cycle, also a sixty-day cycle, which, since it is calculated totally independent from the movements of the sun and moon, may be called a sixty-day "week". The sexagesimal cycle of days is known by the same pairs of names encountered in the sixty-year cycle and enumerated in Table 1. Traditional Ahom priests have made a calendar in which the sexagesimal day cycle is used and according to their calculations January 1, 1980 was a Ka Plow day, or a fiftieth day in the cycle.

For the division of the Ahom day, a list of specific moments as mentioned in Ahom manuscripts was collected by Dr. J. N. Phukan of Gauhati University. Several of these could be readily identified with the aid of a Phakey-speaker<sup>a</sup> and the results are given in Table 3. At first sight the table contains but a series of expressions regarding moments of the day which give no indication of a culture-specific system of time-reckoning. Words for "sunrise" or "dinner time", are probably universal in human

<sup>a</sup> I thank Dr. Phukan for letting me of it in this volume, record his list and for permitting the use

TABLE 3  
AHOM TRADITIONAL DIVISIONS OF THE DAY

Ahom expression	Description
Puu tii khuen na kai khan	Rising, before cock's crow
Na kai khan	Cock's crow
Chao lung	Early morning
Puu luk chao	Getting-up time
Puu chuk naa	Face-washing time
Puu kang neu ban rung	Time of sunrise
Rung kin ngai	Breakfast time
Ban tin	Midday
Kin ban	Midday meal time
Ban kham	Evening time
Ban tuk	Sleep time

society. However, on closer inspection it will be clear that the list contains some words which appear related to units of time, such as *ban*, *tin* and *kham*, which may gain importance when they are compared with similar lists for other Tai groups.

#### The Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti

The representatives of these groups who have lived for several generations in Assam normally use the Assamese calendar for everyday purposes. Only amongst the Phakey, some informants recollected that long ago a ten-day week had been in use. No single person could remember all the names of this week, but in a discussion with several informants the following list could be established: Kap, Nap, Hai, Mueng, Puek, Kat, Khut, Hung, Tao and Kaa. It was also recollected that of these ten days, eight were secular and two were regarded as *kam* (days during which certain types of work were forbidden). Which of the ten were *kam* days could not be remembered. A comparison between the Phakey ten-day week and the series of ten words already noted as part of the Ahom sexagenary cycle establishes that the two are the same.

That the Phakey once used, not only the ten-day cycle, but also the whole, fully-fledged sexagesimal sixty-day cycle was proven during the second fieldwork period when, at Namphakey village a document was encountered which contains various tables for calculating lucky and unlucky events. One of the tables presents a series of ninety-six numbers, separated into twelve columns of eight, and the eight further subdivided into pairs. The twelve columns stand for the lunar months, beginning with the fifth month, because the Phakey fifth lunar month coincides with the beginning of the Indian New Year in April. In other words, the Phakey appear to use a lunar calendar in which the first month falls in December. The pairs of numbers indicate which days of a seven-day week may be regarded as very auspicious, which ones mildly auspicious, which ones somewhat unlucky and which straightforwardly unlucky. Another table from the document presents two columns of fifteen, each with a sign regarding its being fortunate or unfortunate. The first fifteen stand for the fifteen days of a waxing moon and the second row for the moon's waning half. The table reinforces the idea that the Phakey reckoned once in lunar months. The most interesting table from the document for the purpose of this study, however, is one from

which an auspicious day for holding a marriage ceremony can be read, because the basic unit is the full sexagesimal cycle of days. Because of its interest, I have transcribed the words which were in Shan script, aided in this transcription also by a reading out aloud of the words by a Shan-reading Phakey-speaker. The results are presented in Table 4.

From Table 4 it is evident that the Phakey once used a sixty-day cycle, made up of a decimal and a duodecimal sub-cycle. The ten-day sequence

TABLE 4  
THE PHAKEY LAKNI SYSTEM AND MARRIAGE

Kap Ce	Nap Pao	Hai Ngii	Mueng Mao	Puek Sii	Kat Seu	Khut Singa	Hung Mut	Tao San	Kaa Hao
Kap Mit	Nap Keu	Hai Ce	Mueng Pao	Puek Ngii	Kat Mao	Khut Sii	Hung Seu	Tao Singa	Kaa Mut
Kap San	Nap Hao	Hai Mit	Mueng Keu	Puek Ce	Kat Pao	Khut Ngii	Hung Mao	Tao Sii	Kaa Seu
Kap Singa	Nap Mut	Hai San	Mueng Hao	Puek Mit	Kat Keu	Khut Ce	Hung Pao	Tao Ngii	Kaa Mao
Kap Sii	Nap Seu	Hai Singa	Mueng Mut	Puek San	Kat Hao	Khut Mit	Hung Keu	Tao Ce	Kaa Pao
Kap Ngii	Nap Mao	Hai Sii	Mueng Seu	Puek Singa	Kat Mut	Khut San	Hung Hao	Tao Mit	Kaa Keu

Legend

	stands for:	if married on such a day the wife will die early
	stands for:	if married on such a day the husband will die early
	stands for:	an auspicious day for marriage
	stands for:	after bearing two children the wife will die
	stands for:	the wife will die in labour
	stands for:	husband and wife will not get along and separate.

is identical with the one mentioned above. The series of twelve is Ceu, Pao, Ngii, Mao, Sii, Seu, Singaa, Mut, San, Hao, Mit and Keu. The lists are not absolutely identical with those from the Ahom tradition, but there are sufficient correspondences to establish that the Ahom and the Phakey *lakni* systems are closely related.

Table 4 is also of interest because of the type of symbols which are used to indicate auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. The basic symbol is a loop, and each day of the cycle is marked with two loops in various combinations. If the loops are upright and so close together that they half overlap the sign is interpreted to mean that the day is good to hold a marriage. This sign occurs in just over one-third of the cycle's days. All five other combinations bode ill. It may be assumed that the loops stand for bride and groom themselves and that the sign is to be interpreted as a symbol for "human", or "person". Two overlapping, upright "persons" stand for "harmony". A "person" inverted and superimposed upon another stands for "disharmony". That some such considerations underly the use of the loop symbol is confirmed by the fact that the Yuan, in their traditional tables to calculate auspicious and inauspicious marriage dates, make use of the same symbol. Moreover, the symbols for "auspicious" in these tables are identical. The exact interpretation of the various inauspicious signs shows slightly differing meanings.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the hidden code in these ideograms may aid in interpreting hitherto little understood documents. Thus there exists a Black Tai manuscript which shows some "tête-bêche" figurines which have puzzled researchers. In the light of the above it could be argued that they may indicate "disharmony".<sup>5</sup>

The Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti gave somewhat differing lists of the traditional divisions of the day. These are enumerated in Table 5. In a nineteenth century account of the Assamese Khamti language it is

TABLE 5  
THE ASSAMESE TAI AND DIVISIONS OF THE DAY

Khamyang	Phakey	Khamti	Moment of time
Kai khan			Cock's crow
Wan ook	Hu mueng laing	Hu mueng lieng	Just before dawn
(Kaang) Loe	Kham noi	(Kaang) Wan khuen	Dawn
	Wai ngai	Kang loe	Early morning
Ban ting	Wan ting	Wan teng	Morning
Ban chai	Wan saai	Wan chai	Midday
Ban tuk		Wan tok	Afternoon
Nap sing	Pai kham	Pang kham	Sunset
Kaang khuen	Kang kham	Kang khuen	Evening
Ting khuen	Ting khuen	Teng khuen	Night time
			Midnight

<sup>4</sup> R. Davis, "The Northern Thai Calendar and Its Uses", *Anthropos*, Volume 71, 1976, p. 24. Another interesting variant has been noted for a group in the southernmost reaches of the Tai culture, the "Sam Sam" peoples in the southern part of the Malay Peninsula. See Ch. Archaimbault, "Enquête préliminaire sur les populations

Sam Sam de Kedah et Perlis (Malaisie)", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume XLIX, Part 2, 1959, p. 620.

<sup>5</sup> Y. Laubie, "Tablette divinatoire et ideogrammes à Ngia-lo", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume XXXVIII, 1938, p. 299.



stated that the day is divided into eight *mue* (the *mue* probably meaning "period" or "time"). Each of these eight was given a Tai numeral, beginning with *mue lueng* (first period), just before sunrise, and ending with *pet mue* (eighth period), just after sunset, so that each *mue* roughly corresponds with a time-span of two hours.<sup>6</sup> In addition it ought to be noted that a Khamti informant thought that, long ago, when a Tai wished to indicate specific moments of the afternoon, he referred to the length of the shadow.

TABLE 6  
THE SHAN DECIMAL AND DUODECIMAL SERIES

Decimal series:

Kap, Dap, Rai, Mung, Plek, Kat, Khut, Rung, Taw, Kaa

Duodecimal series:

Saw, Plaw, Ngí, Mau, Si, Siu, Singa, Mut, San, Raw, Mit, Kiu

### The Shan

The use of a sexagenary cycle, made up of a decimal and a duodecimal series of names, has been reported for the Shan of upper Burma in general.<sup>7</sup> The whole sixty-year cycle will not be repeated here; it suffices to present, in Table 6, the two subsidiary series. The first year of the Shan cycle, Kap Saw, undoubtedly corresponds with the Phakey Kap Ceu and the Ahom year Kap Saew.

Amongst the Shan the lunar month is the basic unit in the division of the year. The shortfall between twelve lunar months and the length of the solar year is regularly adjusted so that the first lunar month begins in November. Further details, such as the exact length of each of the twelve months and the method used in adjusting to the solar year have not been found in the available literature. There is a summary account of traditional Shan divisions of the day,<sup>8</sup> unfortunately only in English and omitting the equivalent Shan expressions, which is presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7  
SHAN DIVISIONS OF THE DAY

First cock-crowing time	Soon after three a.m.
Second cock-crowing	"A little later"
Paddy pounding time	Immediately before dawn
Early rice-eating	About eight a.m.
Rice eating	About noon
Evening eating	Eight p.m. or later

<sup>6</sup> J. F. Needham, *Outline Grammar of the Shan States*, Part I, Volume I, Rangoon: the *Tai (Khamti) Language*, Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing, 1900, Government Printing, Burma, 1894, p. 211.

<sup>7</sup> J. G. Scott and J. P. Hardiman (compilers), *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and*

<sup>8</sup> L. Milne, *Shans at Home*, New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1970, p. 119 and

p. 121.

### The Lue

Very little information on the Lue calendar has been encountered in the ethnographic literature which was scanned. The only remark useful to this study is the fact that the Lue calendar is one month ahead of that of the Lao, the eleventh Lao month corresponding with the twelfth of the Lue.<sup>9</sup>

### The Yuan

In Yuan records there is abundant evidence of a sixty-year cycle. Like the sexagenary cycles described above, it is made up of a decimal and a duodecimal set of names.<sup>10</sup> They are given in Table 8. In this table the duodecimal series is provided with a list of twelve animal names. These animal names are believed to correspond with the duodecimal series. They may not be regarded as translations of words, for each of these animals is known in Yuan language with a different, Tai name. The list corresponds, with the exception of the twelfth (elephant), with the well-known cycle of twelve animals known throughout China and Southeast Asia. The Yuan cycle, just as the ones encountered before, begins with a Kaap Çhai year. Accounts that the sixty-year cycle of Chiang Mai begins with the Kat Çhai year<sup>11</sup> rest upon a misunderstanding of the nature of the Yuan cycle and they may safely be ignored.<sup>12</sup> The change from one year in the cycle to another is taken to fall at the moment of the "Indian" New Year in April. In 1980 the Yuan cycle reaches the year Kot San, the fifty-seventh of the sequence.

TABLE 8  
THE YUAN DECIMAL AND DUODECIMAL SERIES

Decimal series	Duodecimal series	
Kaap	Çhai	(rat)
Dap	Pao	(ox)
Lwaay	Nyii	(tiger)
Mueang	Mao	(rabbit)
Pock	Sii	(dragon)
Kat	Sai	(snake)
Kot	Sangaa	(horse)
Luang	Met	(goat)
Tao	San	(monkey)
Kaa	Lao	(chicken)
	Set	(dog)
	Kai	(elephant)

The Yuan reckon in lunar months, each month being divided into a waxing and a waning half. The first month of the Yuan corresponds with the twelfth month of the Lue and the Shan, and in this respect their calendar

<sup>9</sup> H. Deydier, *Lokapala*, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> C. Notton, *Annales de Siam*, Volume I, p. 70; S. Egerod, "The Eighth Earthly Branch in Archaic Chinese and Tai", *Oriens*, Volume 10, No. 2, 1957, pp. 296-7; R. Davis, "The Northern Thai Calendar and Its Uses", pp. 12-3.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, C. Notton, *Annales*

*de Siam*, Volume I, p. 77, and R. Davis, "The Northern Thai Calendar and Its Uses", p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed explanation see M. Vickery, "The Lion Prince and Related Remarks on Northern History", *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume 64, Pt. 1, 1976, pp. 342-43.

appears two months ahead of that of the Lao and the Siamese.<sup>13</sup> The Lue first month begins in late October or early November.<sup>14</sup> The months are known by their Tai number, the only exceptions being the first and the second months which, respectively, carry the names Chiang and Kiang. The first, third, fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh months have twenty-nine days, and the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, tenth and twelfth months number thirty days each. Since a lunation lasts just over 29½ days, a calendar of alternating twenty-nine and thirty days lags slightly behind the moon's visible cycle and once every few years an extra day must be added.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, since twelve lunar months fall short of the solar year by some eleven days, occasionally a complete month must be added. In the system used by the Yuan, the adding of a month occurs seven times every nineteen years. The month chosen for duplication is always the ninth lunar month.

The sexagesimal combination of names, used to indicate years, is also used by the Yuan to count a lengthy "week" of sixty days. The system has not yet completely died out and it is possible to indicate modern days using this cycle. January 1, 1980 thus corresponds with a Yuan Mueang Sai day, or a fifty-fourth day of the Yuan cycle.<sup>16</sup>

### The Siamese

The first recorded Siamese system of counting years, other than eras derived from Indian time-reckoning, is the duodecimal cycle. It can be found even in the earliest inscription in Siamese script, that of King Rama Khamhaeng, dated 1292. The list of twelve names is presented in Table 9. This series represents a list of names which differs completely from those recorded in the duodecimal cycles of the Yuan, the Shan, the Phakey and the Ahom, though their meaning apparently goes back to the same well-known cycle of twelve animals. Again, however, these names do not represent the ordinary Tai words for these animals and they appear to be of foreign origin.

TABLE 9  
THE SIAMESE DUODECIMAL CYCLE

Name	Association	Name	Association
Chuat	Rat	Mamia	Horse
Chaluu	Ox	Mamae	Goat
Khaan	Tiger	Wook	Monkey
Thoo	Hare	Rakaa	Cock
Marong	Dragon	Coo	Dog
Maseng	Snake	Kun	Pig

In the later half of the fifteenth century, Siamese inscriptions occasionally contain references to a sixty-year cycle as described above for the Yuan.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Davis, "The Northern Thai Calendar and Its Uses", p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> R. LeMay, *An Asian Arcday, the Land and Peoples of Northern Siam*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> The synodic month lasts twenty-nine days, twelve hours, forty-four minutes and three seconds, so that in a year this calendar

would lag just over nine hours behind the actual lunation.

<sup>16</sup> Calculated from the date given in Davis, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> R. Billard, "Les cycles chronographiques chinois dans les inscriptions thaïes" *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume LI, 1963, p. 404.

By the seventeenth century, however, a different sixty-year cycle had come in vogue.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the time-reckoning with the sexagenary cycle described above, in this Siamese system the series of twelve names now forms the first part of the year name. Moreover, the names of this transplaced duodecimal cycle are not the sequence Chai, Pao, Nyii, Mao etc., but the list as given in Table 9. A further difference with the sexagenary cycles encountered thus far is the fact that the denary list is a series of numerical terms, derived from the Pali language. The decimal series is given in Table 10. Just like the other sexagenary systems mentioned above, the duodecimal series is repeated five times, and the decimal list six times before a new cycle begins.<sup>19</sup>

TABLE 10  
THE DECIMAL SERIES IN THE SIAMESE SEXAGENARY SYSTEM

Ekasok	(first year)	Chosok	(sixth year)
Dosok	(second year)	Sapsok	(seventh year)
Trisok	(third year)	Athasok	(eighth year)
Chatwaasok	(fourth year)	Naphasok	(ninth year)
Pantchasok	(fifth year)	Samruethisok	(tenth year)

With respect to the Siamese subdivisions of the year, the lunar month is again the basic unit. The Siamese first month begins usually in December. Apart from the first month and the second, which are respectively known as the Aai month and the Yii month, all months are numbered with ordinary Siamese numerals. The words Aai and Yii apparently are derived from the same southern-Chinese counting system which is used in kin-numbering, described in Volume I. The odd-numbered months have twenty-nine days, whilst the even months are thirty days long. Each lunar month is divided into two halves, a waxing half, *khaang khuen*, and a waning half, *khaang raem*. In the odd-numbered months the waning half is reduced by a day to fourteen days. When an extra day is added to a month in order to catch up with the actual lunation, once every four, five, or six years, this day is given to the seventh month,<sup>20</sup> making it a month of thirty days. In order to adjust the lunar calendar to the solar one, seven intercalary months are added every nineteen years. This intercalary month is always added to the eighth, and it may be called the "two-eight-month" or *duean soong paet*. The lunar calendar is still in use in the rural Siamese countryside, where people can make an appointment to meet each other, for example, on the fourth day of waning moon (*wan raem sii kham*), or on the fifteenth day of waxing moon (*wan khuen sip haa kham*).

<sup>18</sup> S. de la Loubère (*The Kingdom of Siam*, Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 169) had understood the duodecimal series, but had not grasped its combination with a decimal series to form a sixty-year cycle. He reports that to the words Chaluu and Thoo the word Sapsok is added "which I understand not, and which was added to the names of the twelfth of the years, which run then to distinguish it from the four

other twelfths of the years of the same cycle". (*Idem*).

<sup>19</sup> The Siamese sexagenary cycle has been described in some detail by Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai ou Siam*, Volume I, pp. 253-55; and O. Frankfurter, *Elements of Siamese Grammar*, Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1900, pp. 137-41.

<sup>20</sup> *Bangkok Calendar*, Bangkok: American Missionary Association, 1862, p. 28.

There can be no doubt that the Siamese knew and used a sixty-day cycle. Interesting for the purpose of this book is to note that this sexagesimal "week" is always made up of names identical to those described for the Yuan, and related to those described for the other Tai. Sometimes the sixty-day cycle is used at the same time as the duodecimal series described in Table 9 is used to mark the year. The sixty-day "week" has been used sporadically, but quite accurately and consistently from the fourteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

It is possible that during the fourteenth century the Siamese may have used the decimal series of the sexagesimal system as a ten-day week, this being counted independently of the seven-day week, which had then already been adopted, together with other aspects of the old established Mon and Khmer traditions. Until now nobody has noticed the likelihood that the Siamese may well have used the ten-day week, but there is some evidence for this in a fourteenth century inscription. A translation of the relevant passage is presented here:<sup>22</sup>

Sakaraja 1279, year of the cock, eighth month, fifth day of the waxing moon, Friday, a "katt rau" day in the Tai reckoning, (the moon being in) the nakṣatra of Purvaphalguni. The hour of the enshrinement is on the sixth day.

The passage is a mine of information for the student of systems of time-reckoning. The traditional Tai aspects are readily isolated. Thus, "year of the cock" shows it was the tenth year in the duodecimal cycle, the "eighth month" is a lunar month corresponding to June-July, the "fifth day of the waxing moon" refers to the numbering system for the half-months, and "katt rau" indicates that it was the forty-sixth day of the sixty-day cycle. Moreover, it is noteworthy that this sexagesimal system is given the epithet "Tai".

Traditionally the day was divided in four equal periods, namely the intervals between dawn (*rung*), noon (*thiang*), dusk (*muet*), and midnight (*thiang khuen*). The first two form the day (*wan*), the latter night (*khuen*). The forenoon is called *chaaw*, and the afternoon is *baai*. During the Ayutthaya period the night was divided up in "watches" of three hours duration, each marked by beatings on bells and gongs (*yam*). The night began with the "early evening beating" (*yam kham*), then at about nine p.m. it was the time of the "first beating" (*yam nueng*). Midnight was also known as "second beating" (*soong yam*) etc.<sup>23</sup> This appears to be primarily a military division of time. As early as the fourteenth century, the Siamese began using a subdivision of the hour called the *baat*.<sup>24</sup> One *baat* in time is reckoned to last six minutes. Its origin is not immediately clear. It was still commonly used by astrologers in the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> R. Billard, "Les cycles chronographiques", p. 404.

<sup>22</sup> A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "The Epigraphy of Mahadhammaraja I of Sukhodaya", Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 11, Part I, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume 61, pt. 1, 1973, p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> J. Kasem Sibunruang, "Khun Chang, Khun Phren" *La femme, le héros et le vilain*, Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque

d'Etudes, Volume LXV, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960, p. 86; Pallegoix, *Description*, Volume I, pp. 255-56; J. Crawford, *Embassy*, p. 328.

<sup>24</sup> Sanguan Ankhong, *Singraek nai Mueang Thai*, Volume I, Bangkok: Phrae Phitthaya, 1971, p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> See the *Bangkok Calendar*, 1862 and following years.



## The Lao

The Laotian calendar contains a sexagenary cycle, made up of a series of ten names, repeated six times and a series of twelve repeated five times in the manner described for the Ahom, the Phakey, the Shan and the Yuan.<sup>26</sup> The two series are presented in Table 11. No definite information has been found on the question at what moment in the year the name used to change to a following one in the sixty-year cycle. In recent centuries it seems that the beginning of the Indian astronomical year in April also served as the beginning of a year in the sexagenary cycle. More recently the beginning of the international year at January 1 has been adopted. The year 1980, according to the Lao sixty-year cycle, is a Kot San year, the fifty-seventh of the series.

TABLE 11  
THE LAO DECIMAL AND DUODECIMAL SERIES

Decimal series	Duodecimal series	
Kap	Çheu	(rat)
Hap	Pao	(ox)
Huai	Nyi	(tiger)
Mueng	Mao	(hare)
Puek	Si	(naga-serpent)
Kat	Seu	(snake)
Kot	Sanga	(horse)
Huang	Mot	(goat)
Tao	San	(monkey)
Ka	Hao	(cock)
	Set	(dog)
	Kheu	(pig)

The Laotian month is lunar. The year has alternating months of twenty-nine and thirty days, the even-numbered months carrying thirty days. The first two months have names, respectively, Çhieng month and Ngi month; all the other months carry ordinary Tai numerals from three to twelve. The word Çhieng is believed to stand for "early".<sup>27</sup> The word Ngi corresponds with "two" in the southern-Chinese counting system mentioned earlier. The beginning of the first lunar month falls between November 14 and December 12. Like the Siamese calendar, the seventh month occasionally receives an extra day so as to make up for the difference between month and actual lunation. In order to adjust the difference between twelve lunar months and the solar year, intercalary months are added from time to time. Again like the Siamese case, this intercalary month always falls immediately after an eighth month of the year and it is called "twice eighth month" or (*duean*) *paet song hon*. The months are each divided in fifteen days waxing and fourteen or fifteen days waning moon.

<sup>26</sup> Tiao Maha Upahat Phetsarath, "The Laotian Calendar", *Kingdom of Laos* (Edited by R. de Berval), Saigon: France-Asie, 1959, pp. 100-105; L. Meridat, "La nouvelle année laotienne", *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, N.S. p. 102.

Volume XVIII, 1943, pp. 110-11 and Thao Boun-Souk, "Notre calendrier", *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, Volume 6, 1971, pp. 133-35.

<sup>27</sup> Phetsarath, "The Laotian Calendar",

The Laotians also knew the sexagesimal "week", using the same sixty combinations of names as in the sexagenary cycle listed in Table 11. An item of information which is little-known, but of considerable interest in the light of the findings amongst the Pha-kei is the fact that the Lao used the decimal series of Table 11 to indicate a regular ten-day week. In this decimal series, every Huai (third) day and every Huang (eighth) day was a rest day. This is related to the fact that every fifth day used to be a market day.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst in olden Siam there were *yams* or "watches" of three hours each, in the Laotian countryside the "watch" is called *nyam*, and lasts half that length, or one-and-a-half hours. There are four periods in the day, each made up of four *nyams*, namely the period between sunrise (*hung*) to noon (*thieng*), from noon until evening (*kham*), from evening to midnight (*thieng khuen*), and from midnight to sunrise. The names of these sixteen watches are presented<sup>29</sup> in Table 12.

TABLE 12  
THE LAOTIAN NYAMS

From sunrise to noon	From dusk to midnight
(1) Tuttang	(9) Tuttang
(2) Ngai	(10) Duck
(3) Thae kao thieng	(11) Thae kao thieng
(4) Thieng	(12) Thieng khuen
From noon to dusk	From midnight to sunrise
(5) Tutsai	(13) Tutsai
(6) Leng	(14) Khua
(7) Thae kao kham	(15) Thae kao hung
(8) Phat lan	(16) Phat lan

Lao astrologers use an elaborate and very accurate system of subdivisions of the day. The smallest unit is an *akson*, which is equivalent to two-fifth of a second, ten *akson* form a *praeme*, six *praeme* a *winathii*, fifteen *winathii* a *baat*, and four *baat* one *nathii*. The *baat* is therefore equivalent to six minutes of the international system and the same as the Siamese *baat* mentioned above. The *nathii* is one-sixtieth of a twenty-four hour day.

### The Tai Neua

Only a few scattered remarks have been found on Neua time-reckoning. When Bourlet mentions that an event occurs in the third month,<sup>30</sup> it may be inferred that they share the system of giving their months a number. Of great interest is the remark that the Neua have a rest day every five days, and that no travel is permitted on such a day.<sup>31</sup> Bourlet does not reveal with what system this five-day week is counted.

Regarding the smaller units of time, more details are available. The Neua appear to use fourteen separate periods in a day, and these are enumerated in Table 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> Bourlet, "Les Thay" . 632.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99; and Thao Boun-Souk, "Notre calendrier", p. 144.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 625.

TABLE 13  
THE TAI NEUA DIVISIONS OF THE DAY

Name	Equivalent	Name	Equivalent
(1) Ka kai	Cock's crow	(8) Khung pan	About 4 p.m.
(2) Khung bang	Sunrise	(9) Dan mat	Dusk
(3) Ko so	Daylight	(10) Chat Chao	Evening
(4) Ko det	About 8-9 a.m.	(11) Khao nam	"Curfew"
(5) Ko kai	About 10-11 a.m.	(12) Sam tai	Deep sleep
(6) Ka ngai	Midday	(13) Dai uoi	Midnight
(7) Khung tuong	About 2 p.m.	(14) Uoi la	Before cock's crow

### The Black Tai and the White Tai

No references to eras or year cycles were encountered in the available literature on these groups. With respect to the beginning of the year the evidence shows considerable variation on the moment upon which the first month commences. Reporting for both the Black and the White Tai, Maspero states that their first month falls in July-August.<sup>32</sup> However, Deydier, writing about one group of White Tai, mentions that their eleventh month falls in September-October, from which it can be seen that their first month must fall in November-December, at the same time as that of the Siamese and the Laotians.<sup>33</sup>

From some of the published Black Tai manuscripts it is clear that the Black Tai know of a sexagesimal "week", which is made up of a decimal and a duodecimal set of names. Unfortunately the decimal set of names has not been published, but the duodecimal set is as follows: Chao, Pau, Nyii, Mao, Si, Sao, Sangaa, Mot, San, Hao, Met, and Kao.<sup>34</sup>

TABLE 14  
THE BLACK TAI DIVISIONS OF THE DAY

Name	Association	Equivalent
Koon kai	Chao	Before cock's crow
Kai khan	Pau	Cock's crow
Tuen chau	—	Rising time
Chan hung	Nyii	Daybreak
Nueng ngai	Mao	Morning cooking
Kin ngai	Si	Morning meal
Pak pom	Sao	Communal rest
Tieng ven	Sangaa	Midday
Ngoai chai	Mot	Declining sun
Nueng leng	San	Prepare evening meal
Pet kai tom huong	Hao	Duck and fowl roost
Muet	—	Late
Muet tieng	Met	Dark
Tieng cuen	Kao	Midnight

<sup>32</sup> H. Maspero, *Mélanges posthumes sur des populations sauvages*, *Un empire colonial français* (edited by G. Maspero, Paris: Van Oest, 1929, p. 235.

I, Les religions chinoises, Publications du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque de Diffusion, Volume LVII, Paris: Civilisations du Sud,

1950, p. 175 and his "Mœurs et coutumes

<sup>33</sup> Deydier, *Lokapala*, p. 233.

<sup>34</sup> Y. Laubie, "Tablette divinatoire et ideogrammes a Ngia-lo", p. 298.

The duodecimal set of names is sometimes linked with a series of expressions dividing the Black Tai day. However, several other moments of the day, not fitting in with the duodecimal system are also known<sup>36</sup> and these are shown in Table 14.

### The Red Tai

The Red Tai first month must fall at a moment of the year, not very dissimilar from that of the Laotian or Siamese one. This can be inferred from the fact that weeding of the rice fields takes place in the sixth month, and that by the eighth month the rice plants have grown to such a size that the ceremony of "ordering of the rice leaves" can take place.<sup>36</sup> The months are lunar, and are reported to follow the "sino-annamite" system. Robert has published an extensive list of divisions of the day,<sup>37</sup> and these are presented in Table 15.

TABLE 15  
THE RED TAI DIVISIONS OF THE DAY

Name	Equivalent
Kai khan mot	First cock's crow, about 1 a.m.
Kai khan song	Second cock's crow, about 3 a.m.
Kai khan sam	Third cock's crow, about 4.30 a.m.
Kai khan si	Fourth cock's crow, about 5 a.m.
Kai khan san	Continuous cock's crow
Hung fup fu	Faint daylight
Ta nghin khuen	Sunrise
Det huecong	Bright sunlight
Det ke	"Ripe" or full sun
Poi khoai ke	Buffalo grazing, after first work
Poi fua	Grazing after harrowing, 9 a.m.
Chop ngai	Breakfast, around 10 a.m.
Pom ngau	Shortened shadow
Cham ngau	One walks on his own shadow
Tieng nghin	Midday
Se kai	Early afternoon, 2-3 p.m.
Kai ke, det chon khon	"Ripe" afternoon, slanting sunshine
Chop tang mo bieng	Rice cooking, about 5 p.m.
Kua mu, pet, kai	Feeding the pigs, ducks and fowls
Cho hom ham	Dusk
Chop pau hueon noi	Dinner time for the "small" men
Chop pau hueon luong	Dinner time for the rich
Chop pai in	Time for a stroll
Chop khau muea non	Time to return home to sleep
Luek hing	Very late
Teng hing non dai tuen	Having slept one may wake up
Tieng khuen	Midnight

Apart from the information on moments of time, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter, such a list provides most interesting expressions for those familiar with one or more of the other Tai languages. Someone with a knowledge of Siamese can understand most of the Red Tai entries. "Kai khan" is "cock's crow" in both vernaculars. "Hung fup fu" may be the Siamese "rung fuu" or "rising dawn". "Ta nghin khuen" is no doubt the same as "tawan khuen", or "the sun goes up". Incidentally, the fact that the Red Tai call the sun *ta nghin* is further proof

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> Robert, *Notes sur les Tay Dèng*, p. 80.

for the idea that the word *tawan* is derived from *taa* and *wan*, the "eye" of the day, just like the Malay. "Det hueong" is the Siamese "daet rueang", or "shining sunlight". The Red Tai and the Siamese have not been in contact in historical times and the fact that such lists are almost immediately mutually intelligible is a strong argument in favour of the existence of a homogeneous Tai culture at the end of the first millennium A.D.

### The Dioi

The Dioi calendar has twelve months, there are twelve-day weeks, the days have twelve hours and each hour is divided into twelve parts. Each of these divisions in twelve equal parts may be designated with the help of a cycle of twelve names. These are: Chaeu (rat), Piao (ox), Nyien (tiger), Mao (hare), Chi (dragon), Seu (snake), Sa (horse), Fat (goat), San (ape), Tho (cock), Seut (dog) and Kaeu (pig).<sup>88</sup> The months are reported to be thirty days in length. No further details are available in the literature.

### The Tho

The Tho calendar is heavily influenced by that of the Vietnamese. The month of February has been adopted as the beginning of the New Year, just like the Vietnamese, and the Tho have also accepted Vietnamese eras and year names. The Tho months have twenty-nine and thirty days. The name of the first month is Chieng month, all the other months carry Tai numerals. The days of each month are also counted in Tai numerals.<sup>89</sup>

## OVERVIEW

### a) The sexagenary cycle

The complete sixty-year cycle, made up of combinations of a denary and a duodecimal year sub-cycle, has been encountered amongst six different Tai groups (Ahom, Phakey, Shan, Yuan, Siamese and Laotians). In Table 16 all the names from the two sub-cycles are placed next to one another, together with lists obtained from sexagesimal "weeks" from some other Tai groups. The Siamese year cycle has been placed at the side because it deviates considerably from all the others and because it has been pointed out that this atypical cycle is of relatively recent introduction. For the sixty-day "week" the Siamese also have made use of a "Yuan"-type set of names. There can be no doubt as to the fact that the system goes back a considerable time, for it has been used even in the early parts of the Ahom Buranjis which go back to before the thirteenth century A.D. The fact that the sixty-year cycle is used amongst Tai peoples who have lost contact since the early spreading over mainland Southeast Asia makes it clear that it may safely be regarded as part of the Ancient Tai culture.

The sexagenary cycle is an interesting case for the cultural historian in that it shows both considerable similarities and some local deviations. The

<sup>88</sup> J. Esquirol and G. Williatte, *Essai de dictionnaire Dioi-Français*, Paris: Maisonneuve Frères, 1908, p. xxviii.

<sup>89</sup> E. Diguët, *Etude de la langue Tho*, Paris: A. Challamel, 1910, pp. 47-48.



TABLE 16  
THE DECIMAL AND DUODECIMAL SERIES AMONGST TAI PEOPLES

	Ahom	Phakey	Shan	Yuan	Lao	Black Tai	Dioi	Siamese
	Kap	Kap	Kap	Kaap	Kap			Ekasok
D	Dap	Nap	Dap	Dap	Hap			Dosok
E	Rai	Hai	Rai	Lwaay	Huai			Trisok
C	Mung	Mueng	Mung	Mueang	Mueng			Chatwaasok
I	Pluek	Puek	Piek	Pock	Puck			Pantphasok
M	Kat	Kat	Kat	Kat	Kat			Chosok
A	Khut	Khut	Khut	Kot	Kot			Sapsok
L	Rung	Hung	Rung	Luang	Huang			Athasok
	Tow	Tao	Taw	Tao	Tao			Naphasok
	Ka	Kaa	Kaa	Kaa	Ka			Samruethisok
	Saew	Ceu	Saw	Chai	Chau	Chao	Chau	Chuat
D	Plow	Pao	Plaw	Pao	Pao	Pau	Piao	Chaluu
U	Ngi	Ngii	Ngi	Nyii	Nyi	Nyii	Nyien	Khaan
O	Mao	Mao	Mau	Mao	Mao	Mao	Mao	Thoo
D	Si	Sii	Si	Sii	Si	Si	Chi	Marong
E	Chow	Seu	Siu	Sai	Seu	Sao	Seu	Maseng
C	Singa	Singaa	Singa	Sangaa	Sanga	Sangaa	Sa	Mamia
I	Mut	Mut	Mut	Met	Mot	Mot	Fat	Mamae
M	San	San	San	San	San	San	San	Wook
A	Rao	Hao	Raw	Lao	Hao	Hao	Tho	Rakaa
L	Mit	Mit	Mit	Set	Set	Met	Seut	Coo
	Kaew	Kau	Kiu	Kai	Kheu	Kao	Kaeu	Kun

most striking similarities can be read in the lists of names tabulated in Table 16. Some of the names, such as the sixth name in the decimal series, and the ninth name in the duodecimal one are identical for all Tai groups where the lists have been recorded. All others are recognisably related to each other. In all the variants of the Tai sixty-year cycle, the names from the denary series form the "parent", or first part, and names from the duodecimal series always follow.<sup>40</sup> In all cases the same combination is counted to form the first year of the cycle. It may safely be assumed that a Tai who lived at the end of the first millennium and who wished to refer to the sixteenth year of the cycle, would say: "Kat Mao". Linguists will probably be able to reconstruct most, if not all, other combinations of names for the Ancient Tai.

One of the most interesting aspects of local differences recorded in this chapter concerns the actual year which is regarded as the first in a cycle. The Ahom are clearly at variance with the other groups for whom the cycle has been determined. Whilst, according to the Ahom, 1980 is Dap Mut, or the thirty-second year of the cycle, it is Kot San, or the fifty-seventh year to the Yuan and to the Laotians. This difference of fully twenty-five years is probably a good measure of the early cultural separation of the Ahom from other Tai. The Ahom appear to have accepted the complete sexagenary system long before they adopted their writing system. When the *lakni* system became fixed into their written sources for the first time, they seem to have had no method of checking with other Tai groups and adopted quite a different "original year" from where to begin the cycle.

<sup>40</sup> Phetsarath calls it the "mother name" Calendar", p. 100. and the "child name", "The Laotian

Ahom, the Phakey, the Yuan, the Siamese, the Lao and the Black Tai, is also a strong evidence for the venerable age of the system.

As a result of having formed part of the Tai tradition before the branching out over Southeast Asia and the ensuing isolation into different groups, the various sexagesimal day cycles are, at present, not synchronous. In the Ahom calendar, the first day of January 1980 is reckoned to be a Ka Plow day, or the fifteen day of a sexagesimal cycle. In the Yuan calendar, however, the same day is reckoned be a Mueang Sai day, or the fifty-fourth day of the cycle.<sup>41</sup> Using the Siamese system it is a Puek Chai day, the twenty-fifth day of the cycle.<sup>42</sup> The differences are an indication of the fact that the Tai groups have long lived in relative isolation, and also of the fact that they must already have used this counting system before they used their own indigenous writing.

#### **d) The ten-day and five-day week**

The fieldwork notes presented above have revealed that the Phakey once used a ten-day week, counting the days with names of the decimal series from the sexagesimal cycle. It has been argued that the Laotians have counted their days with the same sequence of ten days until recently. These individual, independent strands of information may be taken as evidence for an Ancient Tai ten-day week. Once it is realised that the days were known as a Kap day, a Dap (Hap, Nap) day etc., it is also clear why the decimal cycle always comes first in the combinations with the duodecimal one: the ten-day week is the basic unit upon which the twelve-day series is grafted in order to form the sexagesimal cycle.

This ten-day week must have been an important aspect of time-reckoning, not only for a few astrologers intrigued by the regularities around them, but for the average Tai person. It is argued here that every adult Tai once knew which day of the ten-day week it was, because the old decimal series was divided into two halves, every fifth day forming a "sacred day", a day during which no work was done in the fields.

Evidence for the rest day every fifth day, which reinforces the argument regarding the importance of the ten-day sequence, comes in the first place from three sources, and also there is some corroborating evidence in astrological tables. The first item of evidence is the fact that the Phakey in Assam could remember that the decimal series of days contained two rest days, or sacred days during which certain profane activities were forbidden. The second, and strongest evidence, is the information that traditionally the Laotian people used to halt work every Huai day and every Huang day, respectively the third and the eighth of the decimal series, and that it went back to the time that every fifth day used to be market day. The third account comes from the Tai Neua amongst whom it is reported that they have a sacred day, or rest day, every five days. These three independent reports, together with the evidence for the related ten-day series, and together with the fact that no other "weeks" have been found thus far amongst Tai peoples, other than the relatively recent seven-day week, suffice to make a case for the existence and importance of an Ancient Tai five-day week.

<sup>41</sup> This has been extrapolated from the date given by R. Davis, "The Northern Thai Calendar and Its Uses", p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Calculated from tables given in R. Billard, "Les cycles chronographiques chinois", pp. 414-43.

Some corroborating evidence may be found in one of the traditional diagrams used to foretell auspicious and inauspicious moments. In an earlier publication I have reproduced and described in some detail, what I then called "one of the most widespread timetables" of rural Thailand.<sup>43</sup> It consists of a diagram of thirty-five squares, called "ubaakpong" diagram. Its basic shape is reproduced in Figure 1. The diagram lists all days of the week and provides for each day five periods, for simplicity's sake named A, B, C, D and E. These five periods are given with great astronomical exactitude in the Siamese version; period A lasting from 6.01 a.m. until 8.24 a.m., period B from 8.25 a.m. until 10.45 a.m. and so forth, reaching 6 p.m. at the end of period E. The same sequence may be used to divide the night. When a Siamese wishes to check whether or not a certain time is auspicious, he checks on what day of the week it falls and reads across the diagram through the five types of symbols and determines which symbol fits with his chosen time. Four dots are a very auspicious sign, two dots mildly auspicious, one dot slightly favourable, a blank square is neither auspicious nor inauspicious and a cross is decidedly inauspicious and ominous.

	A	B	C	D	E
Sunday	••••	×		••	•
Monday	•	••••	×		••
Tuesday	••	•	••••	×	
Wednesday		••	•	••••	×
Thursday	×		••	•	••••
Friday	••••	×		••	•
Saturday	•	••••	×		••
	A	B	C	D	E

FIG. 1: The Siamese "ubaakpong"

The same chart has been described for northern Laos.<sup>44</sup> It contains thirty-five squares, recognises five periods when reading from left to right, and vertically mentions the seven days of the week, beginning with Sunday. The symbols and their meaning are identical, and the positions of the dots and crosses in the chart is also the same.<sup>45</sup> Even the name of the diagram corresponds with that of Siam, the Laotian characters read "yaam u

<sup>43</sup> B. J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 156.

<sup>44</sup> Pham Cong Suu, "Une can ne divinatoire du nord Laos", *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, Volume 6, 1971, pp. 160-64.

<sup>45</sup> In the diagram presented by Pham Cong Suu four inauspicious periods are left blank. This must be an accidental omission as will be proven by a close examination of the photograph on p. 166.

*baakppng*", which Pham Cong Suu translates as "the auspicious and inauspicious watches". There is a subtle difference between the Siamese and the Laotian diagram regarding the time divisions. Whilst the Siamese have written out the five divisions of twelve hours, using the international clock, the Laotian example uses five letters, namely "Ch", "S", "Th", "B", and "Y", which stand for *chao*, or "morning", *swaay*, or "late morning", *thieng*, "midday", *baay*, "afternoon" and *yen*, "late afternoon". Local astrologers in Laos state that, just like Siam, the intervals can also be read to divide the night and that the five periods then correspond with "evening", "night", "midnight", "the time between 0.30 a.m. and 4 a.m." and "the time between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m."

A close examination of both diagrams presents a few puzzling aspects. In the first place the division of the day and night into five periods does not readily fit into the traditional Tai systems of dividing these periods. Both the Siamese and the Lao specialists seem to have "squeezed", each in their own way, to accommodate the division into five. A division into four, or eight would have suited the well-known system of "watches" much better. The second puzzling aspect is that the rows of symbols are ordered in such a manner that for the first five days of the week each particular period of time has a different value for each day, but Friday is a repeat of Sunday and Saturday gives the same results as Monday. This presents a certain imbalance which is out of character with astrological charts of the region.

These problematic aspects disappear with the examination of a slightly varying form of the diagram which is also found in northern Laos and<sup>48</sup> which is here reproduced in Figure 2. A comparison between Figure 1 and Figure 2 leaves no doubt as to the fact that the two diagrams are related. The one of Figure 2 is also used to read the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of moments in the weekdays. However, since there are only five horizontal entries, the person who consults the diagram is advised to use the first line for both Sunday and Friday, the second line for Tuesday, the third for Saturday, the fourth for Monday and Wednesday and the last line for Thursday. Whilst the second type of diagram appears much neater than that of thirty-five squares, in that it does not repeat two lines of auspicious and inauspicious symbols, it apparently presents new difficulties regarding fitting in every weekday into the five available slots.

Sunday Friday	∴	×		∴	.
Tuesday	.	∴	×		∴
Saturday	∴	.	∴	×	
Monday Wednesday		∴	.	∴	×
Thursday	×		∴	.	∴

FIG. 2: A diagram from northern Laos

<sup>48</sup> P. Bitard, "A propos d'une canne horoscopique laotienne", *Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, NS, Volume XXXII, 1957, pp. 377-83.

There is little doubt that the twenty-five square diagram is widely known amongst the Tai, for another version of it has been published, this time obtained from the Black Tai. Apparently the meaning of the symbols differs here, for the Black Tai regard the "cross" sign as one indicating good luck.<sup>47</sup>

Pham Cong Suu has probably been the first to recognise that the twenty-five square diagram, here given in Figure 2, represents the older type. Also he surmises, in my opinion quite correctly, that it was somehow related to the ten-day cycle.<sup>48</sup> Apparently he was not aware of the fact that the decimal series was traditionally divided into two periods of five days each, else he would certainly have seen how the five-day week fits best with the oldest type. When the diagrams are read within a five-day week framework it becomes apparent that the inelegant aspects noted above are the result of superimposing a seven-day week upon a system which was created for a five-day week. It is argued here that indeed the twenty-five square diagram was designed by people who used a five-day week and that this may be taken as further evidence for the fact that the Ancient Tai split their decimal series up into two equal parts.

#### e) Divisions of the day

The various lists of divisions of the day, collected for a wide range of Tai peoples, contain a considerable range of methods of time-reckoning. Some, such as the Khamti referral to the length of a shadow and the Red Tai using this as indicator of the sun's passage, cannot be related with certainty because of the vagueness of the first report. Others, such as the reference to the sound of cocks' crowing in the very early morning, are ubiquitous. The cock's crow occurs at irregular intervals between approximately one a.m. until daylight, and the designation is therefore rather vague. Amongst a rural people there seems little need to be very specific or accurate before four a.m. Other moments of the day indicate repetitive human activities, such as "paddy pounding time", "face washing time", "early morning rice-cooking time", "breakfast time", "chicken-feeding time" and "bed time". This method of time-reckoning is probably ubiquitous amongst farming peoples and the overview of Tai terms does little more than underline the fact that Tai culture and rice cultivation have been intimately linked, and that from the earliest days the chicken has occupied an important position as a domestic animal. The words for cock's crow seem closely related amongst all Tai peoples.

Of greater interest are the words for moments in the day which are derived from observations of the sun's movement. From the data collected it may be assumed that the Ancient Tai day was timed as beginning at sunrise. This could be regarded as additional evidence against a "northern origin" of the Tai peoples, for in the higher latitudes the differences in the times of sunrise between the different seasons make that moment an awkward one to use as a fixed commencement of the day. Apart from sunrise, there are three further major fixed points: namely midday, dusk and midnight. Undoubtedly the Ahom word *tin*, Khamyang *tĩng*, Phakey *tĩng*, Khamti *teng*,

<sup>47</sup> Y. Laubie, "Tablette divinatoire et ideogrammes à Ngia-lo", p. 296. <sup>48</sup> Pham Cong Suu, "Une canne divinatoire du nord Laos", p. 164.



Siamese *thiang*, Laotian *thieng*, Black Tai *tieng* and Red Tai *tieng* are all related and these point to an Ancient Tai word for "midday". Similarly it can be argued that the Ancient Tai word for midnight was the word for "noon", followed by the word for "night" (Khamyang *tieng khuen*, Phakey *ting khuen*, Khamti *teng khuen*, Siamese *thiang khuen*, Laotian *thieng khuen*, Black Tai *tieng cuen* and Red Tai *tieng khuen*).

General words indicating morning time often have the word *ngai* or *ngai* in common (Ahom, Phakey, Lao, Black Tai, Red Tai). This word *ngai* also occurs in Siamese with the meaning of "morning", "daylight", and amongst the Tai of southern Thailand it indicates specially the first period of the morning, from sunrise till about 9 a.m.<sup>49</sup> In this manner a list of Tai names dividing the day in moments and periods, excluding all references to regular human and animal activities, can be set up. The Ancient Tai began the day with sunrise (*hung, rung*), then followed early morning (*ngai, ngai*), but they also had a word covering the whole period between sunrise and noon (*chao*). A fixed moment in the day was noon (*tin, ting, teng, tieng, thieng, thiang*), followed by the afternoon (*chai, saai, chai*) and dusk (*muet*). The whole period of daylight was known with a word related to *ban, wan, oin*, and *nghin*, and the whole period of darkness was probably related to a word such as *kham*.

In the many lists of divisions of the day no widespread pattern revealing a more exact and regular division of the day could be found. It is quite possible that the Ancient Tai knew "hours", or "watches", but the description of these exact subdivisions thus far remains limited to the Siamese and the Lao and this does not warrant their inclusion in the Ancient Tai method of time-reckoning.

<sup>49</sup> McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, p. 223.

## THE ANCIENT TAI CALENDAR IN WIDER PERSPECTIVE

After the survey of all available material on Tai methods of time-reckoning, the next stage in the method adopted is to study the literature regarding the peoples surrounding the Tai. As before, it is not intended here to provide a full overview of the Indian, the Burmese, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Cambodian and other systems of computing time; only aspects of their systems will be examined. The choice of aspects is guided by the findings of the previous chapter. For example, since there has been no reason to presume an Ancient Tai method of reckoning in eras, all references to ancient eras are left out of consideration. However, because a sexagenary cycle has been established as a feature of Ancient Tai time-computation, this sixty-year cycle features prominently in this chapter. In this overview of literature, first the sexagenary cycle and the related sexagesimal day cycle are discussed for all groups, then the lunar calendar and the system of adjustment to the solar year are studied, and finally there are some remarks on weeks, days and subdivisions of days.

### SECTION 1

#### The sixty-year and the sixty-day cycles

##### a) *The Indian system*

In the Indian literature, amongst the many references to periods of time longer than a year, there is occasionally a mention of a sixty-year cycle. It is established that this cycle was in use during the sixth century A.D., but scholars disagree as to the time of its introduction in the Indian calendar.<sup>1</sup> It is often known as the Jovian cycle for it was originally based upon calculations relating to Jupiter's revolution. Soon, however, the difference between solar year and Jupiter's revolution was no longer adjusted and the cycle lost its link with the planet's movement. The sixty years in the Jovian cycle are known by sixty separate names. These Sanskrit names<sup>2</sup> cannot be subdivided into series of ten or series of twelve. There seem to be no links between the Tai sexagenary cycle and the Indian one.

There is, in Indian time-reckoning sometimes mention of a unit of sixty days, named *ritu* or "season", but here again there is no reason to suspect a link between it and the Tai sixty-day system.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. Sewell and S. B. Dikshit place the introduction of the cycle halfway the fourth century A.D. (*The Indian Calendar*, London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1896, p. 36). A. Cunningham estimates that the Jovian cycle was introduced before the Christian era (*Book of Indian Eras with Tables for Calcu-*

*lating Indian Dates*, Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1970, p. 18).

<sup>2</sup> A. Cunningham, *Book of Indian Eras*, p. 25 gives the full list.

<sup>3</sup> L. D. Barnett, *Antiquities of India*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1964, p. 238.

b) *The Tibetan cycle*

The Tibetan sixty-year cycle is a well-known feature of that region's chronological system which has been established for a long time. Just like the Tai system, the Tibetan cycle is made up of two series of words, one series of ten, the other of twelve; the first being repeated six times, the second five times, the first forming the beginning part of the year's name, the second forming the latter part. Thus far the Tibetan system appears identical to the Tai. There are, however, also some differences. The greatest difference lies in the composition of the series of ten names. They are in Tibetan, and consist of only five terms, each term duplicated. They are given in Table 17.

TABLE 17

## THE TIBETAN SERIES OF TEN AND TWELVE NAMES

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Decimal series (translated):

Wood, Wood, Fire, Fire, Earth, Earth, Metal, Metal, Water, Water

Duodecimal series (translated):

Rat, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Serpent, Horse, Sheep, Ape, Bird, Dog, Hog

---

These are none other than the well-known "five agents" of the Chinese system of time-reckoning. Another difference with the Tai system is that the Tibetan cycle is reckoned to begin with a Fire Hare year, reputedly in the year 1027 A.D.<sup>4</sup>, whilst the Tai cycle begins with a combination of years equivalent to the Tibetan Wood Rat. According to the Tibetan way of counting 1980 is a fifty-fourth year in the sexagenary cycle, which does not correspond with any of the Tai dates calculated thus far. Finally, the Tibetans use the system only to calculate years and do not extend the system to cover a set of sixty days.

Apparently the Tai and Tibetan systems are related, and both peoples have derived this aspect of their calendar from the same source. However, they diverge sufficiently, especially in the denary sub-series, to warrant the conclusion that the Tibetans and the Tai did not adopt the system at the same time.

c) *Mon and early Burmese cycle*

From about the tenth century A.D. onward there is an occasional reference in Mon, and later in Burmese sources, which indicate the knowledge and use of a twelve-year cycle.<sup>5</sup> The names of the twelve years are apparently derived from Pali names, which originally belonged to lunar months, and therefore there seems no evidence of a link with the Tai calendar. In addition there is no sign of the use of a sexagenary cycle or of a sexagesimal day-cycle in Mon and Burmese inscriptions. The Mons, especially those

<sup>4</sup> Further details can be found in B. Laufer, "The Application of the Tibetan Sexagenary Cycle", *Young Pao*, Volume XIV, 1913, p. 571. Year Names", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Volume XII, Pt. 2, 1922, p. 80; G. H. Luce, *Old Burma—Early Pagan*, Volume II, Locust Valley: J. J. Augustin, 1969, p. 330.

<sup>5</sup> J. S. Furnivall, "The Cycle of Burmese

who lived in the region now called Thailand, knew the famous sequence of twelve animals, but they gave these animals names from their own language. These names, such as Kanei (rat), Kleo (ox), Kla (tiger)<sup>8</sup> and Kseh (horse), Babe (goat) and Klik (pig)<sup>9</sup>, show no correspondence with the Tai list of names.

#### d) The Akha

It is reported, for at least some of the Akha,<sup>10</sup> that they count years with the help of a twelve-year cycle. The list of year names appears to be made up of words in their own language and these have no bearing on the list found amongst the Tai. The Akha list of twelve animals is also used to count a twelve-day week. No evidence was found of their ever having used a sixty-year, sixty-day or ten-day series of names in their time-reckoning.

#### e) The Khmu, the P'u Noi and the Lamet

For the Khmu it has been reported that they use a sixteen-day cycle. This rather unusual week reputedly is made up of the Laotian names from the twelve-year cycle, to which four of the Khmu's own names have been added.<sup>11</sup> The ethnographers have provided the full list of the Khmu "sixteen-day cycle", from which it will readily appear that these names do not represent just the Laotian twelve-year cycle names, and neither do the Khmu seem to have added any names of their own. The sixteen names are: Kap-Sanga, Rap-Mot, R'uai-San, Mueng-Rao, Blak-Sot, Kat-Go, Kot-Cho, Ruong-Plau, Tau-Nyi, Ka-Mau, Kap-Si, Rap-So, Ruai-Sanga, Mueng-Mot, Blak-San and Kat-Rau. It is clear that all these names are derived from the fully-fledged sixty-year, or sixty-day sequence as known amongst the Tai. As a matter of fact the names are in perfect sequence, representing the names from the thirty-first to the forty-sixth number in the system. The account, together with the fact that the ethnographers were ignorant of the sexagesimal system strongly suggests that the Khmu use the complete sixty-day "week", and that they share with the Tai all the names of the sixty days. The account provides sufficient evidence to establish both the decimal and the duodecimal series, which have been incorporated in Table 18 below. The idea that the Khmu possess the complete sexagesimal system is not based only upon the half-understood list provided by Roux and Tran-Van-Chu, but it finds confirmation in the observation, made by Notton, that the Khmu use the sixty-year cycle and that the names are identical to those used by the Tai.<sup>12</sup>

The P'u Noi also know the complete sexagenary cycle, which they are reported to have borrowed from the Tai Lue. In addition they are known to have a fifteen-day week, the origin of which is not immediately clear.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> G. Coedes, "L'origine du cycle des douze animaux au Cambodge", *T'oung Pao*, 1931, Volume XXVIII, p. 319.

<sup>9</sup> C. Duroiselle (editor), *Archaeological Survey of Burma, Epigraphica Birmanica*, Volume I, Part II, Rangoon: Government Printing, 1960, p. 104 *et seq.*

<sup>10</sup> A. Bernatzik, *Akha und Meao*, Volume 2,

p. 434.

<sup>11</sup> H. Roux and Tran-Van-Chu, "Les Tsa Khmu", p. 184.

<sup>12</sup> C. Notton, *Annales de Siam*, Volume I, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> H. Roux, "Deux tribus de la région de Pongsaly", pp. 488-89.

The Lamet know a sixty-day week, but do not use it for ordinary keeping track of the days; it is important only when they wish to calculate whether a day is auspicious or inauspicious.<sup>12</sup> All three of the minority groups appear to have taken the list of sixty names from Tai peoples, together with many other features of Tai culture. In Table 18 the decimal and duodecimal list of names, which could be extrapolated from the data, is given for all these three minority groups.

TABLE 18  
DECIMAL AND DUODECIMAL NAMES AMONGST  
KHMU, P'U NOI AND LAMET

DECIMAL			DUODECIMAL		
Khmu	P'u Noi	Lamet	Khmu	P'u Noi	Lamet
Kap	Kap	Kap	Cho	Cho	Toeh
Rap	Hap	Rap	Plau	Pau	Plau
R'uai	Hoai	Rvai	Nyi	Nyi	Nyih
Mueng	Mueng	Mwng	Mau	Mau	Mau
Blak	Puk	Pluk	Si	Si	Sii
Kat	Kat	Kat	So	So	Seh
Kot	Kot	Kwt	Sanga	Sanga	Singaa
Ruong	Nuong	Rung	Mot	Mot	Mot
Tau	Tau	Tau	San	San	Saen
Ka	Ka	Kaa	Rau	Hau	Rau
			Sot	Set	Saet
			Go	Kho	Kuuth

#### f) The Chinese system

The Chinese have used a sexagesimal day cycle, based upon a series of ten and one of twelve names, since very early times. The formulation of the names in both the series probably goes back to the earliest formation of Chinese script; in several instances they have been traced to a time, thousands of years before our era.<sup>13</sup> The series of ten names became known as the "ten heavenly stems", whilst the duodecimal set was described as the "twelve earthly branches".<sup>14</sup> The ten stems were related to "five agents" in the manner shown in Table 19. The Chinese sexagesimal cycle was formed by combining the two series; names from the decimal sequence always being placed at the beginning, and names from the duodecimal set at the end (hence the imagery of "stems" and "branches"). In Han times this sexagesimal cycle was used first to indicate sixty days. Somewhat later, probably from the first half of the first century A.D. onwards the system was extended to make a cycle of sixty years. The two series became the basis of an intricate system of time-reckoning. The first two days of each season were calculated to fall on two specific days of the decimal series; each season commencing with a particular set of two days. This gave rise to the system of the "five agents", which eventually found its way to the Tibetan sexagenary system as well as to that of the Vietnamese, as will be seen below. The "twelve earthly branches" became used to mark the

<sup>12</sup> K. G. Izikowitz, *Lamet, Hill Peasants in French Indochina*, pp. 171-72.

<sup>13</sup> Ho Ping-Ti, *The Cradle of the East*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1975, p. 236 ff.

<sup>14</sup> W. Th. de Bary, Wing-tsh Chan and B. Watson (compilers), *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1960, pp. 221-22.



TABLE 19  
THE "TEN STEMS", "FIVE AGENTS" AND "TWELVE BRANCHES"

Ten stem	Five agents	Twelve branches	
Chia	Wood	Tzu	(rat)
I		Ch'ou	(ox)
Ping	Fire	Yin	(tiger)
Ting		Mao	(hare)
Mou	Earth	Ch'en	(dragon)
Chi		Ssu	(snake)
		Wu	(horse)
Keng	Metal	Wei	(goat)*
Hsin		Shen	(monkey)
Jen	Water	Yu	(cock)
Kuei		Hsü	(dog)
		Hai	(boar)

\*De Bary (*ibid.*) associates the sign Wei with "sheep", but I prefer to use "goat". For arguments in favour of the latter see E. Porée-Maspero, "Le cycle des douze animaux dans la vie des Cambodgiens", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume I, 1960, p. 312.

position of the planet Jupiter in each year of its twelve-year cycle. The "twelve branches" were also used to divide the day into two-hour periods. The association of the "twelve branches" with a list of twelve animals, as enumerated in Table 19, goes back also at least to Han times.<sup>15</sup>

The various stages of the sexagesimal system's development have therefore been established for early China. There can be little doubt as to the fact that this aspect of Tai time-reckoning is derived from the Chinese. Research has indicated that the Tai system contains various archaic aspects. Li Fang-Kuei has deduced from a comparison of a series of lists of duodecimal sets of names that the Tai borrowed these Chinese terms not later than the sixth century A.D. Moreover, it may be inferred from the correspondences he notes, that the Tai probably learned this method of calculation directly from users of the Chinese system and not indirectly, via systems already adapted to other cultural traditions.<sup>16</sup>

Theoretically, it could be argued that the fact that the year-cycle of the Chinese runs absolutely parallel to that of the Yuan and of the Lao (1980 being the fifty-seventh year in the cycle in all three instances), is another piece of evidence for the close links between the Chinese and the Tai cycles and that the Ancient Tai must have derived this feature directly from the Chinese. As the evidence stands at present, no such weight may be given to this correspondence. It has been shown that the Ahom cycle is "out of step" by twenty-five years. It is, in theory, quite possible that other Tai groups, including those whose descendants became the Yuan and the Laotians, were also "out of step", and that thirteenth century contacts between Sukhothai and China were an occasion for synchronising the cycles.

There remains a puzzling aspect after the Chinese and the Tai sexagesimal systems have been compared. Whilst the duodecimal lists of names

<sup>15</sup> Tung Tso-Pin, *Chronological Tables of Chinese History*, Volume I, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960, p. vi.  
<sup>16</sup> Li Fang-Kuei, "Some old Chinese Loan Words in the Tai Languages", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Volume 8, 1944-45, pp. 333-42.

are clearly related to each other and derive from some archaic set of Chinese words, the decimal set of Tai words appear totally unrelated to the well-known Chinese set. The Tai series, of which eight variants have been recorded in Tables 16 and 18 above, forms a very distinctive set of names which undoubtedly goes back to Ancient Tai times and it may be assumed that these ten names are similar to the ones which the Tai used when they adopted the sexagesimal system for the first time.

Two possibilities present themselves as explanations for these anomalous ten words. The first one is that in southern China there were variants of the "ten heavenly stems" and that one of these variants had found its way into the sexagenary system before the Tai commenced adopting the system. The second explanation lies in the idea that the Tai peoples might already have had a series of names associated, for example, with days of a week, and that they combined their own list with the Chinese duodecimal set of names in order to form a Tai cycle of sixty. These are but working hypotheses, and further research is needed to throw light upon the origin of the Tai series of ten.

g) *The Hmong system*

Although Savina is of the opinion that the Hmong do not possess a proper calendar,<sup>17</sup> later ethnographers have arrived at different conclusions. Nusit Chindarsi reports that the Hmong have a lunar month as the basic division of the year, and that each month is divided in two weeks of twelve days each and a third, shorter week, of five or six days' duration, to complete the month. Fortunately a complete list of the thirty names is reported in evidence.<sup>18</sup> It is reproduced, somewhat abbreviated, in Table 20. The ethnographer notes that the first syllables of these days represent a cycle of twelve animals. Apparently the series of animals derives from the Chinese "twelve branches" and their animal associations. However, alerted by the knowledge on systems of time-computation from surrounding peoples, it is possible to discern another feature in the list of names, such as the fact that the first ten names possess the syllable *sa*, the second ten the syllable *gao*, and the last ten the combination *hning-gao*. The last syllables form a

TABLE 20  
THE HMONG TWELVE-DAY WEEK

First week	Second week	Remainder	Animal
Ga-sa-i	Ga-gao-pi	Ga-hning-gao-ji	Chicken
Glee-sa-oa	Glee-gao-ploa	Glee-hning-gao-jo	Dog
Bo-so-pi	Bo-gao-ji	Bo-hning-gao-sieng	Pig
Hnung-sa-ploa	Hnung-gao-jo	Hnung-hning-gao-hyi	Rat
Njew-sa-ji	Njew-gao-sieng	Njew-hning-gao-joa	Ox
Ju-sa-jo	Ju-gao-hyi	Ju-pi-jo	Tiger
Loi-sa-sieng	Lo-gao-joa		Rabbit
Yang-sa-hyi	Yzang-hning-gao		Dragon
Nung-sa-joa	Nung-hning-gao-i		Snake
Hneng-sa-gao	Hneng-hneng-gao-oa		Horse
Yzang-gao-i	Yzang-hning-gao-pi		Goat
La-gao-oa	La-hning-gao-ploa		Monkey

<sup>17</sup> F. M. Savina, *Histoire des Miao*, p. 220 and p. 222.

<sup>18</sup> Nusit Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, pp. 58-59.

repeating decimal set. It seems that each day is provided with a number, based on a decimal system of counting. The combination of duodecimal and decimal series is reminiscent of the Chinese sexagesimal system. However, if the Hmong once had such a system for counting days, it has undergone some drastic modifications, for, unlike the Chinese (and Thai), the duodecimal series is taken to form the first part of the day's name. Moreover, the duodecimal set ought to begin with the word for Rat, and not with Chicken.

#### h) *The Muong*

The Muong of northern Vietnam possess both a duodecimal set of names and a decimal one in their time-reckoning, but each of these sets operates independently and has a separate purpose. The twelve names are those of the series of twelve animals, and are used in a year-cycle, whilst the series of ten is connected with a ten-day week. The animal years are known with terms closely related to the Vietnamese twelve-year cycle. The ten-day cycle consists of the Muong numerals *mot*, *hai*, *pa*, etc. Just as with the Hmong, each month is counted in three decades, and each of these decades carries a distinguishing syllable. The first ten days of a month carry the syllable *Ko'l* (plant) or *mok*; the second ten are distinguished by *long*, or *trong* (middle), and the third set by *koi*, *lun* (complete) or *kwe* (final).<sup>19</sup>

The Muong have gained a measure of fame in the history of the twelve-year cycle, because Coedès established the fact that of all Southeast Asian dialects, that of the Muong contained in its ordinary vernacular, most of the animal names found in the Cambodian list, which the Khmer adopted at some time before the eleventh century A.D.<sup>20</sup> This finding is of great interest since it suggests the route through which the Khmer were introduced to this widespread system of time-reckoning.<sup>21</sup> It seems to have come from the northeast, when considering the situation from the Khmer perspective. It should not be read to mean that the Muong must be regarded necessarily as the disseminators of aspects of civilization. Benedict has clearly stated that the terms involved reflect a "proto-Muong" level.<sup>22</sup>

#### i) *The Vietnamese*

The Vietnamese possess a sixty-year cycle, made up of a denary set and a series of twelve, to form bi-nominal year names in the manner of the Chinese system, described above. The lists of names are given in Table 21, together with their associations. The most interesting aspect for the purpose of this study is the fact that the series of ten is apparently based upon the Chinese "five agents". The Vietnamese seem to have split each agent into two sub-types, the first one a "pure" force of nature, the second that same force, harnessed by man.

<sup>19</sup> J. Cuisinier, *Les Mu'ong*, pp. 502-5.

*T'oung Pao*, Volume VII, 1906, pp. 51-122.

<sup>20</sup> G. Coedès, "L'origine du cycle des douze animaux au Cambodge", p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> On this spread, see E. Chavannes "Le cycle turc des douze animaux",

<sup>22</sup> P. K. Benedict, *Austro-Thai Language and Culture*, New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1975, p. 121.

TABLE 21  
THE VIETNAMESE SERIES OF TEN, THE SERIES OF TWELVE AND  
THEIR ASSOCIATIONS

Decimal		Duodecimal	
Series	Association	Series	Association
Giap	Salt water	Ti	Rat
At	Water from a well	Suu	Buffalo
Binh	Lightning	Dan	Tiger
Dinh	Incense	Meo	Cat*
Mau	Living tree	Thin	Dragon
Ki	Timber	Ti	Serpent
Canh	Mineral	Ngo	Horse
Tan	Metal vase	Mui	Goat
Nham	Virgin lands	Than	Monkey
Qui	Cultivated land	Dau	Cock
		Tuat	Dog
		Hoi	Pig

\*Apparently the word Mao, association "Hare", of the original system became confused with a local word for "cat".

The Vietnamese system of "five agents"<sup>22</sup> differs from that of the Chinese in that the order of agents has been changed. Originally the sequence was: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water, but the Vietnamese take Water, Fire, Wood, Metal and Earth. A comparison of the Chinese and Vietnamese lists reveals also that the Vietnamese words are almost homophonous with those of the Chinese, and these associations therefore probably represent a poetic local invention by someone familiar with the Chinese five agents who found five couples of Vietnamese words, almost fitting in with the original model. With regard to the duodecimal set of names, the Vietnamese also know this list in a version, related to Muong words, mentioned above, which is shared with the Cambodian and Siamese peoples. The Vietnamese cycle runs exactly like that of the Chinese (and Yuan and Laotians), 1980 being a fifty-seventh year.

#### j) The Khmer cycle

The Cambodian sexagenary cycle is virtually identical with the one described for Siam and listed in Table 16 above. There can be no doubt that there has been close interaction between Khmer and Siamese in the establishment of that cycle. The twelve-year cycle had been introduced at a very early age via the Cambodians to Siam. Later the Pali-based denary set was added, probably upon Siamese initiative in imitation of the ancient sixty-year cycle in operation amongst other Tai peoples. The result was a completely new sexagenary bi-nominal set. This cycle is not regulated so as to run in accordance with that of the Chinese.

<sup>22</sup> The list of associations can be found in A. Schneider, *Les institutions annamites en basse-Cochinchine avant la conquête française*, Volume II, Saigon: Claude & Cie, 1901, pp. 256-59. A somewhat garbled version can be read in A. Cadell Crawford, *Customs and Culture of Vietnam*, Rutland: Tuttle, 1966, p. 186.

## SECTION 2

## The lunar calendar

a) *The Indian system*

The Indian calendar possesses a computation of time based upon the movement of the moon. This lunar year begins on the first day of the waxing moon of the month Chaitra, which falls in late March or beginning April, always before New Year's day as calculated according to the Indian solar year takes place. Like most lunar calendars, it is adjusted with intercalary months in order to remain in step with the solar year. Whenever there are two new-moons while the sun is in one and the same sign of the zodiac, a month is intercalated. Therefore, according to the Indian system, intercalary months may fall at any time of the year, and occasionally a month is even suppressed in order to adjust the calendar to the solar reckoning. With respect to the number of days of the lunar month, the Hindu month lasts twenty-nine or thirty days according to the true movements of the sun and moon, and not according to a pre-designed system of "long" and "short" months. The duration of each waxing and each waning half of the moon is determined by astronomers who base themselves again upon the true movements of the sun and the moon. A waxing or waning half may be as short as fourteen days or as long as sixteen days.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, the Hindu lunar calendar does not form the basis for that of the Tai.

b) *The Burmese system*

The Burmese lunar time-reckoning shows a measure of Indian influence in that the lunar year is calculated to commence with the first waxing day of the month Tagu, which corresponds with the Indian month of Chaitra. However, in all other respects it differs from the Indian lunar calendar. Thus the Burmese lunar months are counted alternatively to be twenty-nine and thirty days. All waxing halves of the month are reckoned to hold fifteen days, and the waning halves fourteen or fifteen, depending on whether the month is "short" or "long". Moreover, the intercalary month is added at a fixed period of the year, namely between the fourth and fifth Burmese month, in July. An intercalary month is added seven times in nineteen years, and the system selected is that this month is added in the second, fifth, seventh, tenth, thirteenth, fifteenth and eighteenth year of the nineteen-year cycle.<sup>25</sup> The occasional additional day, which is needed to adjust for the shortfall of lunar months counted at an average of  $29\frac{1}{2}$  days and the actual mean lunation time, is added to the third month, Nayong.<sup>26</sup>

There are some differences between the Burmese lunar calendar and that of the Tai. Thus, the Tai first lunar month falls at a different point of

<sup>24</sup> R. Sewell and S. B. Dikshit, *The Indian Calendar*, pp. 31-32 and J. F. Fleet, in his review of A. M. B. Irwin, *The Burmese and Arakanese Calendars*, in *The Indian Antiquary*, October 1910, pp. 250-56.

<sup>25</sup> Cunningham, *Book of Indian Eras*,

p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Shway Yoe (pseud. J. G. Scott), *The Burman, His Life and Notions*, New York: Norton, 1963, pp. 549-52. See also J. F. Fleet, "Review", p. 252.



time. The extra day needed to adjust the lunar month is added to a different number month, though roughly at the same period of the year, for the Tai seventh month as reconstructed, probably falls at about the same time as the Burmese third. The same can be said for the moment of insertion of the intercalary month, though it falls at the end of the Burmese fourth month, this is roughly the time of the year when Tai peoples insert their extra month. In all other respects the Burmese and Tai lunar time-reckoning are the same and there can be little doubt as to the fact that the systems are related. It may be concluded that statements regarding the Indian origin of the Burmese lunar time-reckoning system<sup>27</sup> are misleading and not based upon a consideration of the full facts.

There remains one aspect of the Burmese subdivision of the year to be mentioned: the names of the months. These appear not Burmese in origin, but hitherto they have not been adequately traced. Apparently these names are unrelated, not only to names encountered in Tai time-reckoning, but also they form a set, unlike any encountered thus far in the literature. For general interest, and in the hope that some scholars, familiar with languages not at my command, will be able to clarify this point, they are presented in Table 22, both in the oldest forms recorded and in modern spelling.<sup>28</sup>

TABLE 22  
BURMESE MONTHS, THEIR NAMES IN OLD AND MODERN SPELLING

Old Burmese	Modern Burmese	Time of the year
Tankho (Tangkhu)	Tagu	March-April
Kuchun (Kachun)	Kasong	April-May
Namyun	Nayong	May-June
Mlwaita	Waso	June-July
Namka	Wagaung	July-August
Tuinsalang (Tawslang)	Tawthalin	August-September
Santu	Thadingyut	September-October
Tanchongmun	Tasaungmon	October-November
Nattaw	Naidaw	November-December
Plasciw (Plasuw)	Pyatho	December-January
Tapuiwthway	Tabodwe	January-February
Tapong	Tabaung	February-March

### c) Akha and P'u Noi months

The ethnographic information on minority groups of mainland South-east Asia is not very informative on the details of the yearly calendar. It is said that the Akha know a month of thirty days.<sup>29</sup> It would be necessary to find out whether they also have months of shorter duration and how they relate lunar and solar years to each other before that information is of use. Of greater interest is the remark that the Akha New Year is celebrated "four days before new moon in December"<sup>30</sup>. Many

<sup>27</sup> Cunningham, *Book of Indian Eras*, 328-29.  
p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> The list of old Burmese names is a summary from a larger list in Luce, *Old Burma—Early Pagan*, Volume II, pp.

<sup>29</sup> Bernatzik, *Akha und Meao*, Volume 2, p. 433.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem*.

more details are needed before that puzzling and intriguing snippet of information can be understood.

For the P'u Noi the first lunar month begins in late November or early December. Like other aspects of their calendar, this has been adopted reputedly from the Lue system. This does not agree with the information recorded in Chapter 6, regarding the Lue New Year, which falls in late October or early November. It seems therefore that the P'u Noi took this feature from the Laotians, rather than the Lue. On the other hand it is possible that at least some of the Lue share with the Laotians this November-December beginning of the first lunar month, an aspect which has turned out to be likely to have been a feature of the Ancient Tai calendar. The P'u Noi names of the months (Dueon Chieng, Dueon Nyi, Dueon Sam etc.) are Tai. Just like the calendars of all Tai of that region the months with odd numbers have twenty-nine days and those with even numbers thirty. Every two or three years an intercalary month is added. Noteworthy is that, unlike the Siamese and the Lao, who duplicate their eighth month, the P'u Noi take their intercalary month to fall behind their ninth month.<sup>31</sup>

#### d) The Chinese lunar months

The Chinese lunar month is counted from new moon's day to the following new moon's day. A common year consists of twelve lunations, whilst a leap year has thirteen, although only twelve names are used, the intercalary lunation bearing the name of the antecedent one.<sup>32</sup>

Already in the Han period the lunar calendar was made up of long months of thirty days and short months of twenty-nine days which alternated with each other. Every thirty-two or thirty-three months an intercalary month was added.<sup>33</sup> The names of the twelve months are the same as the names of the "twelve earthly branches", mentioned in Table 19. Indeed the division into twelve months could have formed the basis upon which the duodecimal series was originally constructed, selecting twelve out of a much larger number of "animal" constellations to mark months.

The frequency of adding intercalary months was decided after the discovery of the so-called "lunar cycle" of nineteen years. Chinese astronomers found out that, if on a particular day of the year it is, say, new moon day, after an interval of nineteen years new moon will again take place on that day. After this discovery it was easily seen that nineteen years correspond with 235 months, and that every "lunar cycle" a total of seven intercalary months had to be added in order to bring solar and lunar years into step. The Chinese leap years in the cycle of nineteen years are the third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, fourteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth year.<sup>34</sup> The year 1980 is the fourth year of such a lunar cycle.

From the details, mentioned above, it is quite clear that the Tai lunar calendar (as well as that of the Burmese), is based upon the Chinese system,

<sup>31</sup> H. Roux, "Deux tribus de la région de Pongsaly", pp. 488-89. Petersburg: R. Laverentz, 1886, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> M. Loewe, *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China During the Han Period, 202 B.C.-A.D. 220*, London: B. T. Batsford, 1968, p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> H. Fritzsche, *On Chronology and the Construction of the Calendar with Special Regard to the Chinese Computation of Time Compared with the European*, St. Petersburg: R. Laverentz, 1886, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Fritzsche, *On Chronology*, pp. 11-23.

and not upon the Indian. This explains the use of the nineteen-year cycle as well as the alternating long and short months. The Tai differ slightly from the Chinese lunar calendar described here in that they do not take an intercalary month every thirty-two or thirty-three months, but have adopted a fixed place in the year upon which astronomers may decide to insert the additional month. Another Tai feature, which does not occur in the Chinese system, is the numbering of the months, rather than associating months with the animal cycle.

Owing to the typically Tai method of numbering the months it is possible to establish with reasonable certainty when the commencement of the first month must have fallen. It has been argued above that the Ancient Tai most probably celebrated New Year somewhere between late November and early December. In this respect the Tai also appear to vary from the Chinese. The Chinese New Year occurs between 21 January and 20 February. Many mainland Southeast Asian peoples, especially those living in Vietnam, follow the Chinese in this respect.

A little-known, but thought-provoking piece of information is the fact that the Chinese calculation of New Year to begin in January or February dates from the Han period. Immediately before the Han, the Chinese lunar year used to commence with the new moon nearest to the winter solstice.<sup>35</sup> This pre-Han Chinese New Year corresponds reasonably well with the reconstructed Ancient Tai New Year. In theory, it could be interpreted as a sign that the Thai adopted the Chinese lunar calendar before the Han period, (or Tai chauvenists could argue that the Chinese derived their earlier form of lunar calendar from the Tai). However, this hypothesis must be regarded as very unlikely, because the salient aspects of the system adopted by the Tai, such as their sexagesimal day-cycle and sexagenary series, were not developed in China until centuries had passed after the Chinese had adopted their January-February New Year. It is more likely that the Tai had already a fixed time for their New Year and that they adapted the introduced Chinese calendar to suit their own manner of time-reckoning. This may also be seen in connection with the fact that the Tai retained their own method of counting months.

### c) *The Muong and the Vietnamese systems*

The Muong count twelve lunar months. The first one bears the name Gieng, and the twelfth the name Chap, whilst all those between are counted with their regular number. Cuisinier reports that the first month begins in the second half of January,<sup>36</sup> but Przyluski has stated that they calculate the beginning of the first month a full month earlier than the Vietnamese. This indicates that at least some of the Muong, at some stage of their history, might have become a month "out of step". This phenomenon can occur as a result of the rather intricate system of intercalary months. As soon as a group has lost track of the nineteen-year cycle and its regular intercalations it is possible that their calendar "drops behind" one or even more months. This phenomenon has also been noted amongst some of the

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Cuisinier, *Les Mu'ong*, p. 504.

<sup>37</sup> J. Przyluski, "Les rites du Dong Tho;

Contribution a l'étude du culte du dieu du sol au Tonkin", *Dan Viet Nam*, Volume 2, 1948, p. 3.

Tai peoples and it may be read as a measure of the relative isolation of the Muong and some of the Tai groups at some stretch of their history.

The Vietnamese months also carry regular numerals, apart from the first and the last month which are called, respectively, Gieng and Chap. It appears therefore that the name of the first month in Ancient Tai time-reckoning (related to Ahom: Ching; Yuan: Chiang; Laotian: Chieng, Tho: Chiong) may well be related to the Muong and Vietnamese name for the first month and that this feature of time-reckoning may be derived from the very easternmost part of mainland Southeast Asia.

The Vietnamese lunar months alternate between complete months of thirty days and incomplete ones of twenty-nine. Intercalated months take the name of the month immediately preceding. These are features apparently derived from the Chinese calendar. Vietnamese intercalary months may fall at any time of the year, with the exception that the first, eleventh and twelfth months are never doubled.<sup>39</sup> In the latter respect the Vietnamese are clearly at variance with the Chinese and the Tai.

#### *f) The Khmer lunar calendar*

The Cambodian lunar calendar exhibits basically the traits generally found in Mainland Southeast Asia and which have already been traced back to the Chinese system of time-reckoning, such as months which are alternating between twenty-nine days and thirty, a fifteen-day period of the waxing half of the moon, with a waning half comprising either fourteen or fifteen days. The Cambodians are alike to the Tai, the Muong and the Vietnamese in that they number their months.

The aspect of the greatest interest for this study is the fact that the first month corresponds with November-December. This has rightly been interpreted by Porée-Maspero as an indication of the fact that the Cambodian New Year once fell in that period of the year. Moreover, this appears to be the case already when the Cambodian calendar was first described by a Chinese, in the thirteenth century report by Chou Ta-Kuan.<sup>40</sup> The fact that the Cambodians share the feature of a November-December New Year, and that this cannot be found in either the Indian calendar or the appropriate stage of the Chinese calendar, requires some comment.

It is quite apparent that a November-December New Year does not fit the yearly cycle of work and rest in the present regions occupied by the Tai and the Khmer. In most places where these peoples live now, the main harvest is not completed until January, which is followed by the period during which the farmers repair their farms and slowly begin to get ready for the rainy season which may be expected in May or June. Keeping this agricultural cycle in mind, it is not surprising that virtually all mainland Southeast Asian farmers have now adopted either the Chinese New Year in January-February or the Indian New Year in April. The latter has become the traditional New Year amongst most Tai and amongst the Cambodian peoples. A November-December New Year is in keeping with an agricultural cycle based upon a northern monsoon, whilst a January-April New Year fits a southern monsoon.

<sup>39</sup> A. Schneider, *Les institutions annamites agraires des Cambodgiens*, Volume I, pp. 40-41, en basse-Cochinchina, Volume II, p. 263.

<sup>40</sup> Porée-Maspero, *Etude sur les rites*

Three distinct pieces of evidence may be placed together for the basis of a new hypothesis, namely that the Tai derived aspects of their Ancient calendar from a region where the northern monsoon was dominant. The first item of information concerns the November-December New Year, discussed in the paragraph above. The second item of information is the distribution of the non-Indian, non-Chinese system of numbering months. It has been found amongst Tai, Muong, Vietnamese and Khmer, pointing to some aspect of Southeast Asian time-reckoning which may be part of a local system. The third item is the spread of "proto-Muong" names for the Chinese duodecimal cycle to the Cambodian (and Siamese) calendar, indicating that calendrical information spread to Cambodia from a north-eastern direction. These three items may be taken together with the fact that the northeastern monsoon dominates the Annamite and Tonkinese coast, and that this is the only region in mainland Southeast Asia where this monsoon is important. This may be the region where a local Southeast Asian calendar system may have evolved, traces of which are still visible in present-day traditional methods of time-reckoning. Whether or not the argument can be accepted as more than a hypothesis depends upon future research.

### SECTION 3

#### Weeks, days and subdivisions of days

##### a) *The Indian system*

Thus far no sign of a ten-day or a five-day week has been found in the literature on Indian time-computation. The typical Indian "week" is the division of the Indian lunar month into four intervals. These are from the day of the new moon to the eighth day of waxing moon, from there to full moon day, then to the eighth day after the full moon, and finally to the day of new moon. These days were since very early times, long before the beginning of our era, the traditionally sacred days of the Indian lunar time-reckoning, and the intervals varied slightly as months and half-months were reckoned long or short. The Southeast Asian countries which adopted Buddhism have accepted a similar division of the lunar month into four periods, because ever since the earliest days of Buddhism these sacred Hindu days had become also its days of worship. However, since the lunar month in Southeast Asia's mainland is calculated upon slightly different principles from the ones which form the basis of the Indian lunar month, the Buddhist holy days of Southeast Asia are also slightly out of step with those reckoned according to the Indian lunar calendar.

Although the interval between two Hindu or Buddhist sacred days may often coincide with a week of seven days, the seven-day week is completely distinct from the four-fold division of the lunar month. The seven-day week probably originates from Babylonia. It was used in India in the fifth century A.D. and probably earlier.<sup>40</sup> Under Indian influence this week was intro-

<sup>40</sup> P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, Oriental Series, Class B, No. 6, 1958, pp. Volume V, Part I, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Government 679-85.



duced to Southeast Asia. It has been shown that the Ancient Tai calendar did not use the seven-day week, so that this feature of time-reckoning needs no further attention here.

With respect to the divisions of the day, in early India several different systems developed, each system using its own set of terms and interrelations between the various units. Amongst the many systems, one is of particular interest in this study.<sup>41</sup> Its basic units are presented in Table 23. In the system, an *aho-ratra* is equal to twenty-four hours, so that a *ghatika* is twenty-four minutes, a *vinadi* twenty-four seconds, a *prana* four seconds, and a *gurv-akshara* two-fifth of a second. It will be clear that the Laotian *akson* is derived from the Indian *gurv-akshara*, the Lao *prame* is none other than the Indian *prane*, and the Lao *nathii* is equivalent to the Indian *ghatika*. Apparently this Indian system, or one closely related to it, gave rise to the Laotian one which contains also the units *winathii* and *baat*.

TABLE 23  
AN INDIAN METHOD OF DIVIDING THE DAY

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10 <i>gurv-aksharas</i> (long syllables)	= 1 <i>prana</i> (breath)
6 <i>pranas</i>	= 1 <i>vinadi</i> or <i>pala</i>
60 <i>vinadis</i>	= 1 <i>ghatika</i> or <i>nadi</i> , or <i>danda</i>
60 <i>ghatikas</i>	= 1 <i>aho-ratra</i>

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In yet another Indian system of dividing the day<sup>42</sup> the term *yama* is encountered in the meaning of a "watch" of three hours duration. This may safely be regarded as the origin of the Siamese three-hour *yam*, as well as the Laotian *nyam* which is half as long. All these units of time, from *akson* to *yam* may therefore be eliminated from possible inclusion in an Ancient Tai system of time-computation, because they appear all to have been introduced, together with many other aspects of Indian culture, in more recent times.

#### b) The Burmese system

The common traditional subdivisions of the Burmese day are remarkably similar to those of Siam and Laos. The Burmese know "watches" of three hours each, beginning with a watch from six a.m. to nine a.m., undoubtedly derived from India, as was indicated in the preceding paragraph. There is also a Burmese system of finer divisions of the day, in which four *naya* are equal to one *kana*, twelve *kana* are one *kaya*, ten *kaya* are one *pyan*, six *pyan* are one *bizana*, fifteen *bizana* are one *pad*, four *pad* are one *nayi* and sixty *nayi* are equal to one day and one night.<sup>43</sup> There is little difficulty in recognizing that the Burmese *kaya* is the same as the Laotian *akson* (and the Indian *gurv-akshara*), that the *pyan* is the same unit of time as the *prame* (and *prane*), that the *bizana* is none other than the *winathii*, and the *pad* is the Siamese and Laotian *baat*, whilst the *nayi* is equivalent to a *nathii* (or *ghatika*). It is a quite remarkable fact that of all the various Indian systems

<sup>41</sup> Barnett, *Antiquities of India*, p. 237.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>43</sup> Shway Yoe, *The Burman, His Life and Notions*, p. 551.

of dividing the day, it is one and the same list which underlies the one used by Burmese, Siamese and Laotian astronomers and astrologers. A specialist on Indian systems of computation of time might be able to identify the exact text which must have formed the basis of this parallel development.

Apart from the divisions of the day which are suitable to the ritual specialist in his calculation of exact auspicious moments, there is also a traditional village daily subdivision, based upon factors such as general positions of sun and moon and regularly recurring daily activities of farmers and their domestic animals.<sup>44</sup> Some of these moments of time are enumerated in Table 24. Unfortunately Shway Yoe provides only a segment of the complete list, halting some time in the morning with the frustrating word "etcetera". Moreover, amongst the few expressions listed, several of the time-markers, in particular those referring to Buddhist monks, represent aspects of time-computation which came with the advent of Buddhism, and which can therefore have no bearing on questions relating to the Ancient Tai culture. The remaining few entries show more attention paid to the height of the sun above the horizon than was encountered in any of the lists of Tai divisions of the day. The Tai occasionally refer to the shadow's length in diurnal time-reckoning.

TABLE 24  
BURMESE TRADITIONAL DIVISIONS OF THE DAY: SOME EXAMPLES

Description	Approximate time
The earliest cock-crowing time	
Before the sky is light-time	
When the light gets strength	5.30 a.m.
When monks go on alms-round	6 or 7 a.m.
When monks return from alms	8 a.m.
Breakfast time	8 a.m.
When sun is a span over horizons	
When sun is high as a toddypalm	
Etc.	

c) *The Akha, Khmu, P'u Noi, Hmong and Lamet weeks*

In the ethnographic literature on Southeast Asian minority groups there is an occasional reference to a week. The Akha are reported to use a twelve-day week,<sup>45</sup> and since they designate each day with an animal from the Chinese duodecimal series, there can be little doubt that this week is formed, directly or indirectly, as a result of the Chinese calendrical system. The same twelve-day week has been encountered amongst the Tai Dioi, and also amongst the Hmong and the P'u Noi. The latter call their twelve-day cycle a *ti-y*.<sup>46</sup> The account for the Khmu, in which it was reported that they possess a sixteen-day week, has been dealt with in some detail in the first section of this chapter. It has been shown that the account is not wholly reliable and that the Khmu probably use the full sexagesimal day cycle.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 553-54.

<sup>45</sup> Roux, "Deux tribus de la région de

<sup>46</sup> Bernatzik, *Akha und Miao*, Volume 2, Pongsaly", p. 431.  
p. 434.

In this cycle they use the decimal series as "stems" and therefore they can be said to possess a ten-day cycle.

In all works consulted there was only a single remark which could be read as evidence for the existence of a five-day week. This remark can be found in the standard monograph on the Lamet. These people, who occasionally use the Tai sexagesimal cycle in order to determine whether or not a day is auspicious, consider that it is best to plan festivals on days beginning with Kaa or with Pluk.<sup>47</sup> A perusal of Table 18 establishes that the Lamet Kaa day is the tenth of the decimal series, whilst a Pluk day is the fifth. The fact that the Lamet derive their use of the sixty-day cycle apparently from Tai peoples can be used in this case as corroborating evidence for the existence of a Tai five-day week. It is unlikely that the Lamet have taken this aspect directly from the Laotians, for the latter used to consider the third and eighth day of the decimal series as festive ones.

d) *The Chinese week and subdivisions of the 7<sup>th</sup> day*

There is strong evidence suggesting that from very early times, long before the Han period during which the main features of the sixty-day and sixty-year cycles were adopted, there was an early week. This week was called *hsün* and lasted ten days. It seems that this ten-day cycle served as a subdivision of the lunar month. This feature has been encountered also amongst present-day Hmong divisions of the month (see Table 20), and in the descriptions of Muong and Vietnamese months. It appears quite possible that Hmong, Muong and Vietnamese derive this feature from ancient China. In the early Chinese system of time-reckoning the *hsün* cycle had an important religious significance. Specific days of the *hsün* week were reserved by the ruler for worship of particular ancestors.<sup>48</sup> This *hsün* week gradually lost its importance. There is no evidence which would warrant the supposition that the *hsün* week was ever subdivided into two equal parts. It may therefore be assumed that the reconstructed Tai five-day week, like the November-December New Year, and the method of counting months, represents a feature of Ancient Tai culture which is not derived from Chinese methods of computation of time.

From very early times the Chinese have begun counting a new day at the moment of midnight, counting twelve periods until reaching a new day the following midnight, so that each period is equal to two international hours. As can be expected, the twelve periods were given the names of the "twelve earthly branches".<sup>49</sup> There were also smaller divisions of the day. In the early Han period, in the first or second century B.C., a method was already in use which depended upon sun-dials, and whereby the day and night was divided up into one hundred segments, each one equivalent to just over fourteen minutes of modern time. In addition to these accurate ways of time-reckoning, which probably were mostly used by astronomers,

<sup>47</sup> Izikowitz, *Lamet, Hill Peasants in French Indochina*, p. 172.

<sup>48</sup> J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Volume 3, Cambridge at the University Press, 1959, p. 387; Ho Ping-Ti, *The Cradle of the East*, pp. 236-44.

<sup>49</sup> H. Fritzsche, *On Chronology*, pp. 4-5. A rural Chinese method of measuring the twelve parts of the day is mentioned in N. Wain, *The House of Exile*, London: The Cresset Press, 1943, pp. 24-25.

people used a series of descriptive terms, such as "cock-crow", "dawn", "dinner-hour", and "sunset". The sun-dial system and popular expressions were combined, and moments of the day could be described by expressions such as: "dinner hour and three sections (of fourteen minutes each)", or "sunset and four (sections)". The latter in our terms would be "one hour after sunset".<sup>50</sup>

Apart from a few superficial similarities which probably go back to virtually ubiquitous features of time-computation, the evidence from early China shows that there are no close correspondences between what could be established as Ancient Tai features and early Chinese, at least with regard to the diurnal divisions. There is no sign that the Tai have ever used the Chinese unit of a hundredth of a day. The only correspondences in the literature are the fact that the Dìoi and the Black Tai may divide their day into twelve parts. In the case of the Dìoi this may be assigned to a general Sinification, and the list of the Black Tai divisions shows that the Black Tai system does not closely correspond with that of the Chinese.

#### e) *The Muong and Vietnamese diurnal divisions and weeks*

The case, described for the division into twelve parts of the Black Tai day, has also been made for the Muong.<sup>51</sup>

The days, finally, are divided in twelve, and each of these divisions, which consequently lasts two of our hours, is placed under the sign of one of the animal cycle; but the divisions of the day are commonly given metaphorical familiar names, such as "cock's crow", the "small middle" and the "great middle" (for, respectively, the beginning and end of the afternoon), "the gold eyes" (for dusk), "the hour for preparing for bed", "the hour for sleeping" etc. Although several of these appellations can be found in different villages, no uniform list linking them with the twelve divisions can be found.

As described in the previous section of this chapter, both the Muong and the Vietnamese divide a month up into three decimal sets if it is a "complete month", and into two decimal sets and one period of nine days if it concerns an "incomplete one". Each series of ten or nine days is indicated by a generic term, and the position of a day in the series is indicated simply by a numeral.

#### f) *The Khmer week*

In the literature on Cambodia the seven-day week is dominant. It was already firmly established in the thirteenth century.<sup>52</sup> There has been no trace, thus far, of a ten-day week. However, there is ample evidence that the twenty-five squared diagram has long been used in Cambodia.<sup>53</sup> This diagram, described in Chapter 6 for the Black Tai and the Laotians, and, in a variant form for the Siamese, has been used as corroborating evidence for the existence of an Ancient Tai five-day week. If that reconstruction of the five-day week and the link with the diagram was correct, it is suggested that this type of horoscope spread from the Tai peoples to the Cambodians.

<sup>50</sup> Loewe, *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China*, p. 103.

<sup>51</sup> Cuisinier, *Les Mu'ong*, p. 505.

<sup>52</sup> P. Pelliot (translator and editor), *Mémoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge par Tchou Ta-Kouan*, Extrait du Bulletin de

l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, Hanoi: F. H. Schneider, 1902.

<sup>53</sup> P. Bitard, "A propos d'une canne horoscopique laotienne", p. 381. He mentions various Khmer manuscripts.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter several features of the Ancient Tai calendar have been elucidated. It has become clear that, with respect to the sexagesimal and sexagenary cycles, the Tai have adopted the whole system directly from the Chinese. The details suggest that the Chinese chronological methods had already developed to a stage, probably late Han, before they gave these cycles to the Tai, and this diffusion took place before the sixth century A.D. Many peoples of mainland Southeast Asia have been influenced by this aspect of the Chinese calendar, but few have adopted and maintained so completely and so accurately both the sixty-day and the sixty-year cycles as the Tai did.

An unexpected puzzle arising from the broad framework is the origin of the Tai decimal cycle. The solving of this problem may well throw further light upon the Archaic period of Tai history.

With respect to the Tai method of counting months, again, a system of Chinese origin dominates. It has been able to single out a few features which seem indigenous, probably Southeast Asian. This concerns the calculation of the old Tai New Year and the method of numbering lunar months. It has been possible to develop a case for the origin of a set of "Southeast Asian" features in Ancient Tai, Vietnamese, Muong and Khmer calendars, namely the coastal region of Annam and Tongkin, where a northern monsoon dominates the agricultural cycle. It is possible, though, that other parts of Southeast Asia with a northern monsoon may have to be considered before this hypothesis can be developed further.

Regarding the reconstructed Ancient Tai five-day week, only a single further item of information was found, namely that the Lamet possess a calendar relic which may go back to such a five-day week. This evidence, it was shown, is not inconsistent with the idea that the five-day week was originally Tai. None of the other civilizations of mainland Southeast Asia possess such a week and it is suggested that the feature may well be "typically Tai".



## CONCLUSIONS

In this book the technique, developed to study aspects of Ancient Tai culture, has been applied in two distinct fields of enquiry: blood sacrifices and the computation of time. In each case, first the evidence collected personally from the Khamyang, the Phakey, the Khamti and the Ahom peoples, has been presented in some detail, thus filling a considerable gap in the ethnographic literature on Tai peoples. In each case, this was followed by the results of a search through the literature on the whole range of Tai peoples for information on the same aspect of culture. This material then was summarised and an assessment was made as to which aspects qualified for inclusion in the Ancient Tai culture. Guided by these findings, literature on peoples surrounding the Tai was scanned for signs of whether or not patterns, similar to those assigned the Ancient Tai label, could be found. This wider search often proved helpful in unearthing a variety of shared cultural elements, some of them apparently indicating borrowing on the side of the Tai peoples at a fairly early stage of the development of Tai culture, others showing signs of different forms of cultural contact.

This comparative technique has been shown to be a heuristic research method. The above chapters demonstrate clearly that both topics have proven fruitful, in that they could be studied in sufficient detail so as to make it possible to single out the most traditional aspects which different Tai groups have in common. Even more important is the observation that in both the data on sacrifices and in those on time-computation the Tai data, taken as a whole, are markedly different from those of surrounding peoples. The Tai set of data are easily compared, they are similar, compatible and apparently related. The surrounding peoples are heterogenous, and their data have served mainly to indicate what wide variety there exists in the cultural traditions of the region. This observation is particularly valid for the study of sacrificial traditions.

The emergence of a distinctive manner of conducting a Tai communal sacrifice may be seen as a confirmation of one of the basic assumptions underlying this whole exercise, namely that indeed there exists such a phenomenon as "an Ancient Tai culture", in the meaning of a relatively homogeneous tradition which existed at the end of the first millennium A.D. and which rapidly dispersed over mainland Southeast Asia and began to diverge into separate cultures.

It may be pointed out here that the distinctive Tai pattern is not the result of careful editing and selecting only those features out of ethnographic reports which fit in with a preconceived "old Tai culture". Great care has been taken to present full details and not to hide the separate roads that many Tai groups have trodden since their dispersion. In this respect this study differs from many other comparative ethnological works, where researchers, in their enthusiasm, present only the details which support their theory.

An effort has been made to avoid some of the other pitfalls in comparing cultural traditions. Thus, the scope is limited to a specific region. The presentation of data from other cultures has deliberately been limited to the Tai and their immediate neighbours. It cannot be denied that such a limitation has drawbacks; widening the scope would have opened further perspectives. At first sight, the most attractive area for expansion lies in the comparison of the material hitherto collected with ethnographic data from the Philippines and from Indonesia. This, however, would entail a massive amount of work and it is yet by no means certain that it would be likely to produce many new insights. Until now, I have come across but a few links between ritual details of the regions. For example the chthonic snake cult appears to cover all Southeast Asia. With respect to the material presented in this book, only a single instance of striking and detailed similarity between mainland Southeast Asia and Indonesia has been encountered. This concerns a diagram regarding auspicious times, reported for Borneo,<sup>1</sup> which shows a number of features in common with the diagrams discussed above in Chapter 6. This is indeed an intriguing piece of information, but not necessarily one upon which theories can be built. In the first place the Borneo diagram is not completely identical. Secondly, until now, no other signs of contact between peoples of Borneo and those of mainland Southeast Asia have been discovered and assessed; an isolated artifact in common need not suggest more than some rather superficial and fleeting, possibly indirect contact. Thirdly, until now the historical framework in which early contacts between Borneo peoples and those of mainland Southeast Asia could have taken place has not been satisfactorily explored.

It is in the latter respect that the present study differs also from many other works in comparative ethnology: this book is based upon a plausible historical framework. In drawing the outline of this framework, great care has been taken to eliminate all biased and fanciful accounts and stress those pieces of evidence which can withstand a measure of critical scrutiny. The outline of the earliest Tai history which resulted may thus be regarded as rather conservative, placing the "Proto-Tai" period together with the Han dynasty of China. In this case it has been decided that it is better to err on the safe side and only if firm evidence presents itself, which challenges the framework, should the present scope of early Tai culture be widened. A possible line of investigation into the very early times of the formation of Tai culture lies in a comparison of what is known about Tai culture with that of the Dong Son culture. Some speculations along this line were published elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

In Volume I of this set of books it has already been noted that the four Tai groups, representatives of whom live in Assam, conform to a more general Tai pattern, at least with regards to life-cycle ceremonies. The same observation may be made for this volume: the data presented on Khamyang, Phakey, Khamti and Ahom sacrifices, as well as those on computation of time, fit in very well with those for other Tai groups. Moreover, these data have again proved important in establishing Ancient Tai aspects of culture, because it may be assumed that these westernmost groups have been effec-

<sup>1</sup> M. Colani, "Essay d'ethnologie comparée", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-orient*, Volume XXXVI, 1936,

Plate XXXVIII, opposite p. 268.

<sup>2</sup> Terwiel, "The Origin of the Tai Peoples Reconsidered", pp. 252-54.

tively isolated from Tai peoples in China, in northern Vietnam, in Laos and in Thailand. When, therefore, these western groups share a large number of ritual artifacts and display in their ritual actions details which can also be found amongst other Tai groups, these qualify for consideration as possible Ancient Tai aspects of culture.

In order to make it possible for Volume II to be read and appreciated by itself, without constant reference to the first part of the study, it was decided to present a summary overview of the methods and techniques, as well as an outline of the historical framework at the beginning of this book. In the remainder of this concluding chapter two different aspects are brought forward. In the first place a short overview is given of those features which, in the course of chapters 2-7, have been established as likely to have formed part of the Ancient Tai culture. Secondly, there follow some remarks regarding the relationships between Tai culture and that of surrounding groups.

### Aspects of Ancient Tai culture

In Volume I of *The Tai of Assam*, various interesting features of Ancient Tai culture have been established. The basic characteristics of birth, marriage and death ceremonies could be described. Aspects of Ancient Tai tattooing, the likely Ancient Tai headdress, and the determination that most probably Tai society, before its dispersion, must have been divided up into strictly exogamous patrilineal clans, formed some of the rather unexpected results of that study. Moreover, it was clear that the Ancient Tai must have had particular therapeutical techniques, together with specific medicinal lore. The perception of disease, and the Tai system of dividing "life-force" into a remarkably large number of individual "*khwans*" was also found to have been part of the early Tai culture. After the exercises contained in this volume, it is possible to add a considerable amount of new material.

It may be assumed as most probable that, at regular intervals, the Ancient Tai groups used to celebrate community sacrifices. It is likely that this took place, not only in every Tai *mueang*, but also in every large village of some name. At present, the best time for holding such a sacrifice lies some time between March and July. There is no doubt that this is linked with the fact that by then the southern monsoon is due. An essential feature of the communal sacrifice is no doubt a wish to feast the village's or town's guardian spirits, to draw their attention to the fact that a crucial period in the year is imminent and to ask their help and blessing, so that the growing season, upon which Tai society depends, will be fruitful.

It has been found, however, that a few groups celebrate a second, prominent, communal sacrifice six months later, some time between September and November. Various theories regarding the "meaning" of this second sacrifice have been examined. It could be argued that the second ritual basically is connected with a wish to "close off" the rainy season and to make the waters withdraw so that the harvest may take place. It has been said that the second occasion could be a ritual of thanksgiving after a fruitful season. In this volume however, none of these theories are adhered to. In the second part of the book it has been established that the Ancient Tai used to celebrate New Year in November-December, and it has been

argued that this may well have been related to a northern monsoon-dominated agricultural cycle. In the light of this evidence, it seems that the communal sacrifice might originally have taken place some time between September and November in order to celebrate the imminent growing season. The few places where Tai people hold a second sacrifice might thus be a remnant of past practices, which has been abandoned by many Tai groups in order to adjust to a different agricultural calendar when they spread over mainland Southeast Asia.

There can be no doubt as to the fact that the Ancient Tai proclaimed a general rest during the days upon which the communal sacrifice took place. The community temporarily separated itself from the rest of the world. Nobody could leave in order to visit outsiders, and no outsiders were allowed to enter whilst the festival was being held. No work in the fields was permitted. Roads leading to the community were blocked to ensure that nobody would intrude.

The Ancient Tai communal sacrifice was carried out at a shrine outside the actual town or village. There is a strong possibility that as a rule such a shrine was built in the vicinity of a large tree, the tree connected with the guardian deity of the community. The shrine itself was a construction of wood or bamboo, consisting of a horizontal frame, held up at some distance from the ground by a set of poles. The shrine was provided with a thatch roof if it was a permanent construction, but if each year a new one was built, a roof might be omitted.

The sacrifice centered around the ritual slaughter of at least one large domestic animal, usually a buffalo. Such an offering should be a healthy, strong and attractive animal of the male gender. Apart from the buffalo, other gifts to the spirits must have been presented, and in the case of a rather large-scale *mueang* sacrifice, this would have included a selection of other domestic animals, such as ducks and fowls as presents to other powers which were invited, together with the guardian spirits. At all sacrifices, big or large, rice, sweets, and alcoholic beverages must have been included.

It has not been possible to reconstruct the instrument which was used to kill the animal, a considerable variety of weapons having been encountered. The general practice seems to be that the buffalo had a blood vessel cut in its neck. It was important that the killing was accompanied by a show of blood; this substance was collected and separately presented to the gods. The actual killing always took place in the vicinity of the altar.

In the large *mueang*, where the ritual can be expected to have taken an elaborate form, all major gods of the Tai pantheon were worshipped, but in the smaller communities, where only the core ceremonies of the ritual were carried out, the *Phii Mueang*, or guardian spirit of the *mueang* alone may have been honoured. It has not been possible to identify with certainty any powers in the Ancient Tai world of gods, other than *Phii Mueang*. The material brought forward suggests, however, that the general classes of unseen powers, which various traditional Tai groups have in common, may go back to a shared culture. Thus, there were a set of great celestial gods, possibly known by the generic term *then*, or a linguistic precursor of this term; there were gods of natural forces; gods jealously guarding the family laws, especially those pertaining to marriage; gods connected with the earth; and powers inhabiting the surrounding mountains. It would be fascinating

to obtain full details and compare the various pantheons found amongst the Tai. It is theoretically possible that such a comparison would establish yet many further similarities and reveal more of the Ancient Tai religion. One factor which complicates this issue is the fact that the Tai have a tendency to incorporate famous ancestors in their local pantheon, and it is therefore likely that for the separate Tai groups the lists of deities' names may have evolved rather rapidly along different lines. Nevertheless, probably the ancestors do not invade all classes of gods and some reconstruction ought to be possible as soon as sufficient ethnographic details are available.

One of the most important findings on Ancient Tai culture which derives from this book is the central role of spirit possession. In Ancient Tai religion, it may safely be presumed, it was believed that the unseen powers, attracted by the sound of the supplications, by the smell of the flowers, candles, incense, by the odour of alcoholic beverages and the reek of animal blood, and aided by certain ritual paraphernalia, can be persuaded to be present at the ceremony, or sometimes even to preside over the most important stages of the ritual. From the days of the Ancient Tai religion there have been ritual specialists, men and women, who have shown themselves as able to lend their bodies for this purpose. At the appropriate moment, often just before the killings take place, after all the preparations have been made, the spirit medium becomes a god incarnate. Which power descends to attend the ceremony never comes as a surprise. On sessions where many spirits come down, they follow a prepared order and the spirit medium's helpers have sets of clothing appropriate for the various gods at hand and dress up the medium accordingly.

The likelihood that the descent of gods was an essential feature in the Ancient Tai Phii Mueng rituals may explain, at least to some extent, why these communal sacrifices were usually held outside the settlement area, at the sacred grove. The gods would be more likely to appear there than in the profane built-up area. The big tree or sacred grove was an appropriate place for this formal contact between community and the godly powers. The physical appearance of the gods may also be related to the insistence that the community be isolated, and that the roads are blocked off: such measures may have evolved from the group's wish to avoid all circumstances which could hinder the god's coming.

The importance of the unseen powers' descent is further underlined by the fact that there are some ritual paraphernalia which appear to be there solely for the purpose of facilitating this descent. The most important of these is a tall pole to which a candle and some other fragrant gifts are attached. This pole is not simply a symbolic link between heaven and earth, it may be seen as a tool to help the gods find the particular spot on earth. The candle guides and attracts the power to the precinct where the medium awaits him. Another ritual implement which relates to this feature of the sacrifice is the ringed pole, which is there for the sole reason to tether the god's invisible steed for the duration of his presence. This ringed pole, of which the occurrence amongst Ahom and Lao strongly suggests an Ancient Tai origin, may be the precursor of the *lak mueang* which can be found near the sacred grove at many Tai villages in northern Vietnam, and modern versions of which are found in every traditional Siamese *mueang*.



The link between yearly communal sacrifice and mediumship is likely to have been an essential one. This is indicated, not only by implements such as pillars and posts. This feature helps explain the placing of an attractive pillow, it gives added meaning to the chief priest's invocation, and clarifies the use of a welcoming symbol in the form of an uncut areca nut. The spirit medium makes it possible that the Tai, just as the Ancient Tai must have done, can gather once a year to speak to one or more of their gods. It may be assumed that the Ancient Tai believed their chief gods to ride invisible horses and elephants. The Ancient Tai apparently also believed that ritual poles with candles, alcoholic drinks and other gifts were efficacious in ensuring the gods' descent. Such items of information provide some insight in the principles of Ancient Tai religion.

The reconstruction of Ancient Tai ritual posts and their likely use of them, such as the post to guide the gods to the scene of the ceremony and the pole to tether the gods' horses and elephants may be useful with respect to the analysis of present-day Siamese rituals. Up till this moment no scholar has been able to provide a satisfactory explanation for the fact that a ritual pole must be used during the most elaborate of all *khwan* feasts, namely that which is held immediately preceding a young man's entry into the Buddhist order of monks. This elaborate *khwan* ritual may last a whole night and it is replete with features reminiscent of Ancient Tai culture. The aspect singled out as an example here is that the ritual specialist must bring along for the ritual a beautifully decorated post, which is set up in the centre of the room where the ceremony is held. During the ritual a candle, fixed at the top of the pole, is set alight and some gifts are attached to the pole. From these, and other details,<sup>3</sup> it can be taken as most probable that this is nothing else but another descendant of the Ancient Tai "pole of communication", via which the gods used to descend into the body of a spirit medium. Most of the ritual of the ordinand's *khwan*-strengthening appears to be based upon non-Buddhist Tai religion, and a future detailed examination of this and related ceremonies amongst various Tai groups and their neighbours might reveal other, hitherto little suspected, aspects of Ancient Tai culture.

The evidence regarding ritual posts has clearly indicated that ritual posts come in various types and shapes. A pole for tethering the gods' steeds is essentially different from one by the help of which the gods descend. In Volume I yet another type of ritual pole had been established as most likely to have formed part of Ancient Tai religion. This concerns the tall bamboo mast of the funeral customs. In the light of the above it appears that these bamboo masts are a particular variant of the "pole of communication", this time not one to bring gods down, but one with which a deceased person's *khwans*, or at least some of these, managed to make a journey upwards, to the world of the dead.

Whilst the regularly recurring communal sacrifices formed the most important ceremonies which were examined in the first part of this book, various other sacrifices and issues related to sacrifices have been raised. Thus it has been established that it is likely that the Ancient Tai, in times

<sup>3</sup> For illustrations, see T. Silcock (translator), *A Village Ordination*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph, No. 25, London: Curzon Press, 1976, p. 94 ff.

of epidemics or when other major calamities threatened the community, practised a dog sacrifice. A thorough examination of all reports of human sacrifices amongst Tai peoples has established that, whilst various individual groups undoubtedly have practised some form or other of the human sacrifice, none of these qualify for inclusion in the Ancient Tai tradition.

Before moving to other aspects of Ancient Tai culture which have been established in the course of this volume, a few further remarks on sacrifices in general are appropriate. The first of these remarks deals with the frequency of sacrifice. When it is shown that once a year most Ancient Tai groups must have killed a pig or a buffalo in honour of Phii Mueang, this must be understood as the largest of a whole range of sacrifices, for there can be no doubt that the Ancient Tai had a fully developed sacrificial tradition. Many of these ritual killings were much less spectacular than the Phii Mueang sacrifice. In every family, from time to time, a few fowls or ducks were killed, offered to the ancestors, and then consumed. The elaborate life-cycle ceremonies invariably involved a sacrifice, and the meat would be consumed by the family and their guests. Agricultural rituals and therapeutic ceremonies also often must have been connected with ritual slaughter. In even a small-size village every year there must have been scores of occasions for which a sacrifice was the proper thing to do. It has been noticed for some peoples in mainland Southeast Asia<sup>4</sup> that the only occasion when people ate meat from domestic animals was after they had been killed for a religious sacrifice. The Tai peoples may also have fitted in with such peoples.

The literature on the origin and meaning of the animal sacrifice tends to overlook the possibility that the presentation of the victim, as well as the accompanying supplications, may be intimately linked with the fact that the killing of domestic animals is, in many societies, a highly emotionally charged event. Some creature, one which has been carefully reared and whose daily habits and individual peculiarities are intimately known to the rearers, is abruptly transformed into some blood, bones and meat. This situation is basically quite distinct from that of the hunter; a bag of game brought from the forest represents quite a different set of emotions. A catch of fish, or a wild animal shot or caught in a trap is an event to be celebrated as the bounty of nature. Such thoughts cannot easily accompany the slaughter of domestic animals. There are many ways in which farmers may handle the problem of taking the life which they themselves have fostered. They can, for example, do the killing in secret, or involve themselves in a complicated series of exchanges so that the animal passes hands before it is killed. Another way of handling the problematic situation is by attaching the sacrifice with religious motivation and let the killing be done in a ritual fashion. For example, before killing one's best rooster, it may be solemnly declared that this rooster dies to honour and satisfy the ancestors of the house. After all, these ancestors have built the farm, they have reared the progenitors of the present set of domestic animals, they have some proprietary rights in the matter. In such a manner it becomes easier to perform an unsatisfactory act to satisfy one's own needs. Even during the solemn communal sacrifices for Phii Mueang, after the gods have enjoyed and taken

<sup>4</sup> Lafont, *Toloi Djuat*, p. 219.

the life of the buffalo which is offered in their honour, the animal is divided, prepared, cooked, and eaten by all the participants. It represents one of the rare occasions when all can gorge themselves on buffalo meat. The consideration that the killing of domestic animals is a charged act, and that the rituals surrounding it may meet some of the acute emotional needs of the participants may not be regarded as an "explanation" for sacrificial rituals. It is but one of the aspects which ought to be taken into account, an aspect usually neglected in speculations on the essential meaning of such rituals.

There are several more items to be mentioned in the overview and summing up of the findings regarding Ancient Tai sacrificial traditions. One of the findings in the first part of this volume was that the Tai shared a few of the many divination techniques described. Those most likely to have formed part of the Ancient Tai culture were the study of the sacrificed animal's liver for scars, discolouration, or other signs which could indicate whether or not the future looked promising. Another common practice was the examination of the fowl's tongue bone by the ritual specialist. A further technique, consisting of the pressing of thin bamboo slivers in the small holes which can be found in fowls' thigh bones, may also have formed part of the shared tradition, though the evidence for the latter observation is not altogether satisfactory. None of them, however, has been recorded for a range of Tai groups which may be supposed to contain peoples who have been isolated from each other since the days of the Tai migrations over mainland Southeast Asia.

A striking ritual, encountered for sufficiently wide a range of Tai peoples to warrant its Ancient Tai origin, is the custom of swearing an oath whilst drinking the blood of a sacrificed animal.

The second part of the book was devoted to systems of time-reckoning. It was established beyond any doubt that the Ancient Tai used a sixty-year cycle, made up of combinations of words, taken from a series of ten and a series of twelve names. The same names, in the same combinations, were used to denote a sixty-day cycle. Apart from these sexagesimal series, it is clear that the Ancient Tai counted lunar months; they called their first month by a particular name, but most of the other ones were given an ordinary Tai numeral. The even-numbered months were given thirty days, odd months twenty-nine. Each lunar month was divided into a waxing half, which always contained fifteen days, and a waning one which lasted fifteen days if the month had an even number and fourteen if it was odd. Every three, four or five years an extra day was added to a lunar month in order to prevent the calendar to become too far out of step with the visible phases of the moon. The lunar twelve months were adjusted to the solar year by adding, from time to time, an intercalary month. The adding of this extra month occurred always at the same place of the solar year, around July. The system of intercalary months was that seven lunar months were added every nineteen years. It is likely that the Ancient Tai lunar year began in November-December, a feature which may be of great interest regarding the question of the origin of the Tai culture, for it indicates an agricultural system based upon a northern monsoon.

One of the most surprising results of the study of Tai time-reckoning system has been the emergence of the ritual five-day week as a likely part of the Ancient Tai calendar. The reconstruction of this five-day week is a

striking example of the accumulative possibilities of ethnographic data in the framework which has been adopted. During fieldwork amongst the Tai of Assam, information was recorded which later proved to become a corner-stone in the reconstruction process. The evidence gained meaning only when it was examined in connection with reports from Laos.

It has also been possible to reconstruct aspects of Ancient Tai diurnal divisions. Apparently the day was reckoned to begin at sunrise. This may be considered as yet further evidence for the fact that the early features of Tai culture do not appear to have come from a northern part of Asia, for in the higher latitudes dawn fluctuates so much during a year as to make it unsuitable as a point of time to be used in calendar reckonings. Only in tropical regions do dawn and dusk provide useful, fairly fixed points of time. It was shown that the Ancient Tai are likely to have had a series of descriptive expressions to indicate a day's progress. These expressions contained a lot of unsurprising material, such as "cock's crow", and "breakfast time". An examination of these shows little more than the fact that the Ancient Tai share with many other peoples a farmers' calendar. Of more interest proved the expressions for "morning", "evening", and the like. It has been demonstrated that the Ancient Tai possessed terms for "early morning", "the whole morning", "noon", "afternoon", "dusk", "evening", "night" and "midnight", and for all of these it was possible to give an indication of what the terms must have sounded like.

#### **Tai culture in its wider setting**

Many aspects of the Ancient Tai sacrificial tradition have not been encountered in the ethnographic literature of the surrounding peoples. Whilst regularly recurring communal buffalo sacrifices are extremely widespread, the ritual details of this practice described above, are not. These details include important, essential features, such as the insistence on carrying out the ritual just outside the inhabited area, the nearness of a large tree or sacred grove, the use of a raised altar made of plant material, the killing of the animal near this altar, and the custom of collecting and offering the blood to the gods. Very few peoples share this complex with the Tai. Of those peoples who share a significant number of these features, the P'u Noi and the particular group of Hmong for whom the buffalo sacrifice details had been obtained, both were deeply influenced by Tai culture. Only the Khmer and the Pear remained as peoples who appear to have considerable affinity in their sacrificial customs with those of the Ancient Tai. This evidence points to a link with early Southeast Asia, rather than one with China for this aspect of culture.

The dog sacrifice's distribution shows a completely different picture, especially the ritual killing of a dog when a community needs to be preserved from epidemics or other forms of acute danger. The Tai have this particular ritual in common with the Akha, with the Karen, and with the Hmong. The reason for the peculiar distribution of the dog sacrifice most probably must be found in early history. It has been reported in early China, for a time which, in this study, has been assigned the proto-Tai label. It is therefore likely that this ritual was passed on to the Ancient Tai, and to the other groups mentioned above, via the Chinese. This information is not incompa-

tible with the historical framework presented above. Whilst the buffalo sacrifice appears to go back to Southeast Asian practices, the dog sacrifice became part of the Tai tradition during the time when the Tai became intimately involved with Chinese culture, during the first millennium A.D.

The wider perspective has proven very useful in providing background information concerning various types of human sacrifices. It has been demonstrated that the Ahom borrowed one form of human sacrifice from neighbouring Assamese peoples. The Siamese, the Shan, the Yuan, and the Laotians practised, and developed further, a distinct form of ritual human immolation as a result of relatively recent intensive contact with the Khmer and the Burmese. The killing of humans during funeral ceremonies must be regarded as a probable regional development, which was reserved for only very special occasions. Human offerings for the benefit of a community and as part of the annual communal sacrifice have proven to be typically Khmer and most unlikely to have been part of a Tai tradition. This unravelling of the various types of human sacrifices and their respective distribution and spread illustrates clearly the importance of searching for ritual details before making a judgment regarding matters of cultural contact and diffusion. For example, if simply a report of the occurrence of human sacrifice *per se* had been mapped out, without regard for the particular ritual circumstances and without differentiating between distinct types, a picture would have resulted in which human sacrifice was practised by many groups, living in a vast region, ranging from China to India, and from Cambodia to Assam. The evidence collected here has demonstrated that quite separate traditions are involved and that the type of victim which is selected for sacrifice may not serve as a single criterion for cultural contact. The same observation can be made for dog sacrifices. The dog sacrifice has been found amongst a vast range of ethnic groups. However, the reconstructed characteristics of Ancient Tai dog sacrifice were found only amongst some of the surrounding cultures.

An interesting theme which has emerged in the overview of the literature is the distribution of the *talaeo* symbol. The symbol is found in a specifically delineated region, covering most of northern Vietnam, Laos, northern Burma and Thailand, and in this region the *talaeo* is used amongst many different ethnic groups. It seems to be a regional "international symbol". It has been indicated that its function, to warn strangers off, is intimately connected with its being used amongst so many types of peoples. From the fact that thus far no trace of the symbol has been found amongst any of the western-most Tai groups it was assumed that the Tai peoples adopted it shortly after they had begun their dispersion over mainland Southeast Asia. There cannot be made a case for its inclusion into the Ancient Tai culture until the symbol is demonstrated for at least one of the western groups.

The overview of specific divination techniques has revealed an extremely complex pattern. Thus, the technique whereby wood slivers are pressed into a fowl's thigh bone's *foramina nutritia* apparently derives from ancient China and, in the course of millenia it was adopted by many peoples living in a belt which stretches from the island of Hainan westwards to Assam. The custom of throwing curved bamboo sticks also can be traced for thousands of years and was first developed in China. It has been suggested in this study that the custom of letting a piece of bamboo burst in the fire



may be related to yet another method developed in ancient China: the throwing of a flat piece of bone in a fire in order to examine the resulting cracks. Each of these techniques which have been reported for early China is distributed in a distinct and different manner over various peoples, and each appears to have a separate history of diffusion.

Apart from these few techniques which are shared by a great number of ethnic groups and are spread over a vast area, there are many techniques which have been encountered thus far in only one particular region. Thus, the examination of a fowl's foot was encountered only in a particular part of northern Vietnam. The forceful smashing of an egg on a divination board has only been reported for a few groups in upper Assam. The tearing up of leaves in order to consult the omens has been found only in eastern Assam and neighbouring western Burma. The study of divination techniques has proven to be a very complex subject which, if studied in much more detail than has been possible in this volume, may prove rewarding and relevant, not only in establishing aspects of the early history of a region, but also in raising questions as to why certain customs spread easily from one group to another, whilst other practices remain part of a cultural heritage of a single group.

It has been pointed out in this volume that the sharing of a particular divination technique, just like the common use of a prohibition symbol such as the *talao* amongst various groups indicates undoubtedly that some cultural contact has occurred, but it does not necessarily indicate a long process of intimate fusion of cultures. In order to establish a case for the latter, a large number of shared techniques and symbols must be noted, together with the sharing of some more fundamental and profound aspects of culture, preferably accompanied by a plausible historical framework which indicates such contact.

Systems of time-computation may be considered to fall under a general category of techniques and symbols. They are, however, a very special subtype, in that the history of systems of time-reckoning can be pieced together with a considerable degree of accuracy and detail. There have been a series of particular inventions, made in sophisticated cultures, using specific instruments, which can be traced in a progressive line, and which have deeply influenced the time-reckoning systems of less technically advanced cultures.

It has been proven that the sexagesimal system of the Ancient Tai derives from China. The features which are displayed in the Tai version had gradually developed in ancient China and had reached the stage of a fully-fledged sixty-year and sixty-day cycle during the Han period. Some of the features of the cycle of twelve names which forms part of this system as used by the Ancient Tai, indicate that they adopted it before the sixth century A.D. It has also been shown that the series of ten names diverges markedly from that of the Chinese and that the relationship between the Tai set of ten and the Chinese "heavenly stems" remains a mystery. Its solution may provide important evidence regarding the phase of Tai history which in this volume has been labelled "the Archaic period".

Aspects of the sixty-year and sixty-day cycles have been encountered in many ethnic groups, other than the Tai. However, apart from those groups who have adopted the whole system from the Tai, they show a great variation in their application of the system. Many groups use indigenous words

to indicate the series of twelve animals, others have half-absorbed the sixty-day cycle into their lunar calendar. When all the evidence regarding the sixty-year and sixty-day cycles is considered, it is striking how all the Tai versions, apart from the Siamese one, which was introduced at a later stage, demonstrate a close correspondence. There is no doubt whatsoever that they all derive from a common list of terms which has been preserved from Ancient Tai days. This evidence further corroborates the validity of the assumption that just before the dispersion there was such a thing as a quite homogeneous Ancient Tai culture.

It has been established that many aspects of the Ancient Tai lunar calendar also derive from China. The Chinese developed the system of counting lunar months alternatively in long and short ones; they added a day to adjust to the phases of the moon; they discovered the nineteen-year lunar cycle and developed the system of intercalary months. All these features the Tai adopted, but it has been shown that most other peoples of mainland Southeast Asia share this aspect with the Tai. From Burma to Vietnam, the early calendar system with lunar months is primarily derived from China. Historians do not appear to be aware of this fact; it is usually assumed that the first contact of Southeast Asian peoples with a civilization which had solved the major mathematical problems related to the accurate computation of time was with India at the very beginning of our era. Whilst this may be true for the Chams and for some of the peoples living in the Southeast Asian archipelago, it does not hold for the mainland in general. From the survey of archaic aspects of calendars of mainland Southeast Asian peoples it is clear that the benefits of the Chinese advances in astronomical observations had spread widely before there was a sign of "Indianization".

The Ancient Tai lunar calendar deviates in some respects from that of the Chinese, namely in that the months are given numerals in the local vernacular instead of using the names of the "twelve earthly branches", and in the fact that the first Tai month must have commenced in November or beginning December. It has been pointed out that there is a possibility that this feature derives from a pre-Han trait in the Chinese calendar, but this idea has been discarded in favour of one in which the new year was derived from a Southeast Asian calendar.

The wider overview of calendar systems indicates several traces of such a calendar. The name of the first month of the Ancient Tai, the Muong and the Vietnamese appear closely related. Ancient Tai, Vietnamese and Khmer share the non-Chinese custom of numbering the months. Both Ancient Tai and Khmer seem to have known a New Year near end November and beginning December. The Khmer derived their names from the "Chinese" twelve animals from a "proto-Muong" source. These individual items of information have been taken as evidence for a calendar system which once was shared by some peoples of mainland Southeast Asia and which originally developed probably at the coastal areas of Annam and Tongkin, areas where the northeastern monsoon dominates the agricultural cycle and where a November-December New Year would suit the agricultural cycle.

The wider overview did not provide any clues regarding the possible origin of the Ancient Tai series of ten names, nor of the Ancient Tai five-day

week. It is possible that these are only found amongst the Tai, or that this is yet another aspect of a separate calendar system of mainland Southeast Asia.

Entering the realm of speculation, it is possible to imagine that the Dong Son peoples of northern Vietnam were the people responsible for the construction and development of this calendar, features of which are still apparent amongst present-day traditions. Such ideas would fit well with earlier speculations regarding possible links between Dong Son culture and that of the Tai.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of Volume I it was pointed out that the examination of the range of variations of a particular aspect of Tai culture is useful, not only as an example of a scholarly exercise, but also for a number of practical considerations. The findings in Volume II underline this remark. The methods which have been developed here may be applied without much modification to the study of myth and ritual wherever people of common descent have been scattered relatively recently, though I do not expect that there will be many instances which are so clear-cut as the one of the Tai. Until the present the detailed reconstruction of Ancient Tai culture has largely escaped the notice of researchers, and the results fill a considerable gap in the history of the region. Prehistorians and archaeologists may find this exercise of some help in that it isolates certain aspects of Tai culture which may have left hitherto unsuspected traces. Upon reading these studies linguists may decide to further investigate the puzzles unearthed, such as the origin of the series of ten names or the background of the word *talaeo*. Those who, however, ought to be most interested in these volumes are the anthropologists and ethnographers. Hopefully they will be stimulated to produce accurate and detailed reports, for often in the apparently meaningless details the most important historical clues can be found. It is intended to continue the research regarding the reconstruction of Ancient Tai ritual and to scrutinize, amongst other traits, some of the agricultural rituals and add in the near future yet a third volume to *The Tai of Assam*.

<sup>5</sup> Terwiel, "The Origin of the Tai Peoples Reconsidered".

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